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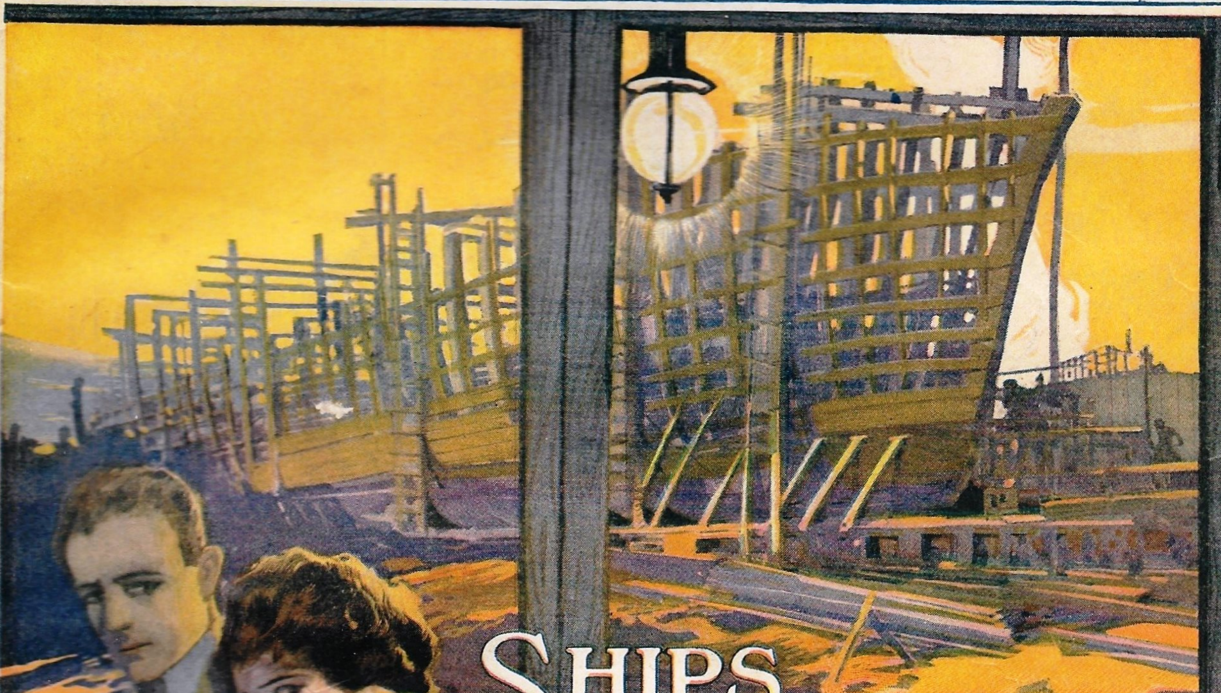
Issued Weekly



SHIPS TRIUMPHANT

by George C. Shedd

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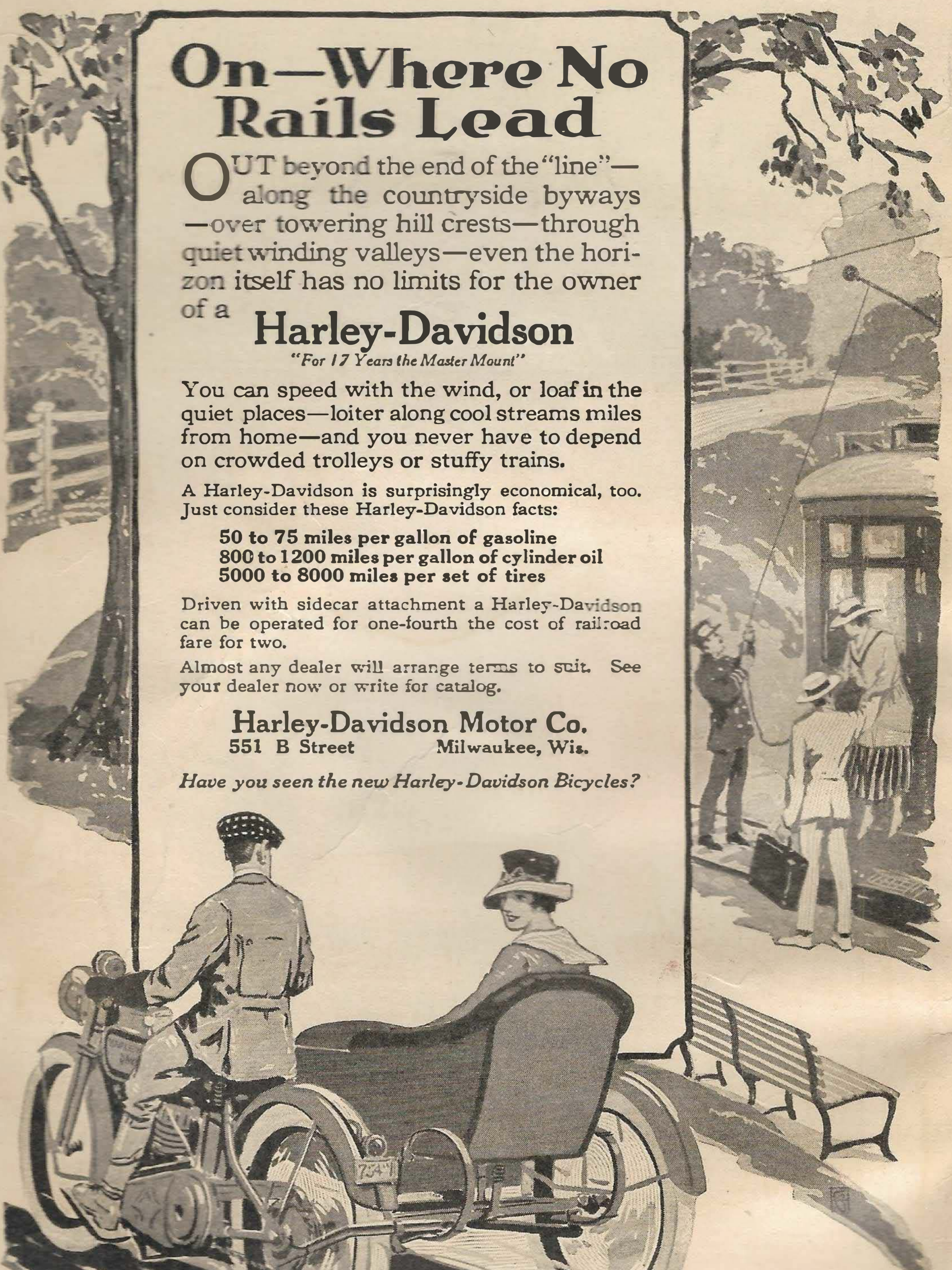

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THE ARGOSY

Vol. XCIII SATURDAY, APRIL 6, 1918 No. 3

Ships Triumphant

by

George C. Shedd

CHAPTER I.

THE GATHERING OF THE VULTURES.

MARTINSPORT is a prosperous little city. It has a dredged channel out to deep water and a thriving export trade. It has an east and west main line railway that makes it the immediate center of that part of the coast.

Two other railway lines come down from the interior here to tide-water and discharge immense quantities of turpentine, staves, lumber, cotton, molasses, and the like, which vessels coming up out of the Gulf of Mexico stow in their hulls and sail away with.

Two long piers project into the sea, where the vessels lie end to end, taking on freight. Some distance east of them there stands a row of smoking canneries amid heaps of oyster-shell.

Westward the water-front is occupied by boat-sheds and fish-houses for a mile or more, where a driveway begins that marks the chief residence portion of the city and that is lined with white mansions.

The basin formed by the two piers had, like the channel, been dredged, and therefore held deep water; the strip of ground connecting the two piers and bordering the harbor remained vacant until along in the fall of 1916.

Then it suddenly became known that this piece of water frontage property had been bought by outsiders — a concern named Stokes Brothers. Railroad trackage went down upon it, a high board fence went up around it, and workmen began to construct ship-ways.

It appeared Stokes Brothers planned to build wooden ships. While every one knew there was big money these days in building ships, it had not occurred to any one that ships could be built in Martinsport, for it never had been done. Not even the four gentlemen who had their arms around most of the little city's wealth, and known locally as the Big Four, who seldom overlooked a bet, had thought of it.

When they looked into the matter and found that Stokes Brothers had picked up the only available shipyard ground on deep water, they felt aggrieved.

When Stokes Brothers refused to let them into their "good thing," their feelings changed—they grew wrathful. Should outsiders have a monopoly that rightfully belonged to them?

The Big Four, seated in "Gas" Main's private office, were discussing Stokes Brothers. A spirit of affection did not prevail—in spite of the fact that they were united by a bond of numerous common interests, it seldom did prevail.

"When Farrington and I interviewed Stokes, he said no stock was for sale, and half an hour's talk didn't move him," Johnson stated, a gentleman of plump, smooth face and inclined to be pompous, and president of the Marine Exchange Bank. "Eh, Farrington?"

"Quite so, quite so," was the answer.

Farrington was chief owner of the other important financial institution (the other four or five banks didn't count) — a shriveled little man with a gray chin-whisker and hands always curved in a clutch.

"Well, what's to be done?" Main asked, called Gas Main by virtue of being head of the gas company. He was a huge bull of a man, with hard steely eyes, a heavy brown mustache, and a mouth that gripped his cigar in an unvarying, powerful trap hold.

"I'm afraid there's nothing to be done," Johnson replied.

Main stared at the speaker, then rolled his eyes upon little Farrington.

"You two fellows are altogether too mild; you're cooking up some trick to skim this cream for yourselves," he said. "Are we in on it or not?"

"There you go — always suspecting something!" Farrington snapped out. "There isn't any scheme."

"Humph!" Main grunted, eying the speaker in disbelief.

"If you imagine—" Johnson began, swelling.

A derisive laugh from the fourth member of the financial quartet interrupted his speech. The laugher was Mr. James Broussard, a tall, slender gentleman, wearing a Vandyke beard, and having a dark, thin, saturnine face.

Broussard was not the president of anything, but he was a director in everything of importance in Martinsport. There were Broussards at the spot before Martinsport came into existence.

And if his confrères viewed each other with perpetual distrust they watched him ceaselessly with something akin to fear—for he was sometimes willing to bleed a little himself if they but bled more, which was against all ethics.

"I myself interviewed Mr. Stokes," he remarked, rising and picking up hat and walking-stick, "and he inquired why you gentlemen told him your banks should not be in a position to make him loans, the discussion having turned on the subject, but that you could accommodate him personally for what he should need."

"And what did you say?" Farrington whipped forth.

"Oh, I answered your banks might be loaned up to the limit—I didn't give you away!"

Johnson and Farrington exchanged a furtive look.

"So you're leaving me out, after all," Main said darkly.

"Nothing of the kind, nothing of the kind. It was purely a matter of perhaps advancing Stokes Brothers necessary loans later on," Johnson stated.

"Tut, tut; be careful what you say!" Broussard put in. "You and that little withered money-ghoul beside you are after a scalp!"

Farrington sprang up in rage.

"If you could hear what people say of you!" he fumed, shaking a clawlike hand at the other.

"Spare me—but it's nothing about foreclosing mortgages on destitute widows *à la* Farrington, I'll warrant!" And with his tight, mocking smile he went away.

"Am I in with you—or am I not?" Gas

Main exclaimed when the door had closed. "I'll take it out of you if I'm double-crossed!"

"We've assured you we've no intention whatever to mislead or deceive you, Main," Johnson answered pompously and a bit indignantly. "Any relations we have with this new shipping company will be limited to those of financial accommodation. Now I must be getting back to the bank. Are you going, Farrington?"

The little banker was also ready to take his leave. And with Gas Main, who had not again opened his lips and who watched them depart without further protest, remaining in his chair, the two men were glad to escape.

"That devil of a Broussard—I could murder him!" Farrington sputtered as they waited for an elevator. "He gave us away."

"I think not; it was pure surmise on his part," Johnson answered. "And Main will presently forget about it. They haven't anything to go on."

"Well, it makes no difference if they have. If you and I can make these loans to Stokes Brothers, let Main howl!"

"Broussard didn't ask to be let in."

"He wouldn't get in if he had," the other barked, clawing his chin-whisker. "For once we'll beat them to a good thing; and if we once have Stokes Brothers' name on our paper, we'll find a way to gain control of that business.

"The plan is really better than buying in on stock, for we'll catch the Stokeses when the time's ripe, grab the stock put up as collateral, take charge of the concern, and let the Stokeses sue their heads off in court."

And the little man began to warm his hands over each other with a frosty smile appearing on his small, hard face.

"And all will be quite legal," Johnson remarked virtuously.

"Yes. And it will teach outsiders to keep away from our legitimate field," said Farrington.

Back in the private office of the president of the gas company Main had continued to gaze threateningly at the door when the pair of bankers closed it behind them. Finally he punched a button and with the appearance of a clerk said:

"Find Mocket for me." Then, after a moment, he asked: "What's he been doing since I fired him?"

"Nothing steady, I believe."

"Hasn't left Martinsport?"

"No; I saw him on the street yesterday. He has been doing odd jobs of accountant work, I've heard."

Main regarded the clerk from under heavy lids.

"Was there ever any rumor why he left here?"

"No, Mr. Main, not that I know of. You kept the matter to yourself, and so, I presume, did he."

"Very well, find him. Tell him I've something to his advantage."

CHAPTER II.

TROUBLE.

ONE morning early in April of the following spring Frederick Stokes and the gentleman who had previously owned the site, Mr. Willard, conversed at a spot in the shipyard near the water. They had been moving about the plant, observing the work going on, and had now halted at this place. It was open and therefore insured privacy.

The harbor lay before them. Several steamships rested at anchor in the water between the two piers, taking on coal from barges moored alongside.

Launches sped to and fro about the basin on business of their own, their exhausts pop-popping industriously. A tug was towing a Scandinavian four-master away from a pier out toward the channel.

Near the men loomed the stern of a building ship, half-concealed by scaffolding, aring with the blows of hammers.

Farther on the ribbed skeleton of a second vessel under construction stretched its huge hollow frame parallel to the first. A pungent smell of new pine scented the air. The multitudinous sounds of industry arose everywhere about the shipyard.

"You appear to be driving the work," Mr. Willard stated. "This boat ought to be ready to launch soon." And he indicated with his cane the nearer vessel.

"In six weeks—if we're not blocked by trouble," Stokes replied grimly.

"Labor trouble?"

"Yes, labor and other kinds. Mostly other kinds, so far, have been happening, but there are signs that we'll get a dose of labor-worry presently. Somebody's stirring things up in order to put Stokes Brothers in a hole."

"I heard indirectly something to that effect," Willard remarked, "so I came over to apprize you of the fact. There's a move on foot to hamstring your business."

Stokes swung about so as to face the speaker.

"When did you learn that?" he asked quickly.

"Yesterday. Nothing definite, but the word was dropped in my hearing. I intend to look into the matter a little further. Having interested myself in having you come here, I was also interested in knowing that some one is after your company with a knife; the news displeased me."

Mr. Willard announced the fact in a tone of voice that carried a slight trace of annoyance. As already said, he was an elderly gentleman. His spare figure, however, was unbent; his cheeks retained a clear, fresh color.

With upper lip shaven in the fashion of an earlier generation, he wore a short white beard that gave his countenance a benign and almost ministerial aspect.

But a keen glint was in his eyes, and the impression of mildness was somewhat lessened when he thrust a long, slim, black, piratical-looking cigar into a corner of his mouth. He shut his lips tightly, which cocked the cigar up at a rakish angle.

"I never did admire this Martinsport bunch of money-bushwhackers!" said he. "Nothing would rejoice me so much as to see you get out your battle-ax and slice off some of the fat from whoever's trying to do you up. I suppose it's one or all of them."

"Your statement that you had heard a rumor I was being attacked makes my suspicion a certainty," Stokes said. "For some time I've suspected there was a design to injure our business. Things went along all right until about the first of March, then troubles began that could be explained only on that assumption.

"We were then ahead of our scheduled rate of construction; we've since lost that gain and gone behind. And, mark you, this happened in spite of the fact that we are employing more men now than then!"

"What were the specific causes of loss?" Willard asked.

"Men shirking, delays, accidents. The superintendent first called my attention to matters a month ago, wanting to know if any one was deliberately working to prevent building of the ships.

"He had an idea there might be German agents at work to stop or destroy the plant. He's convinced that at least some of the accidents have been mischievous, and is sure there's been meddling with the men.

"Not all of them, but with a number—enough to slow up things. He quietly learns who are the slackers, and we replace them with new workmen as rapidly as possible.

"A section of scaffolding fell one night; the watchman swore he saw nothing or heard nothing until the accident happened. I have half a dozen patrolling the yard of nights now.

"Another instance: we had to rip out a deck section—bad material and bad construction both. Mulhouse discovered it before it was all down; and we fired the foreman in charge. No stupidity in the case—couldn't have been. Another time a lot of lumber was sawed wrong lengths — too short. And so on. Everything but fire.

"Somebody put a row of auger-holes in the stern-post of that boat just starting over there—ruined it, of course. Specially sawed timber and will take time to replace it. That happened only last night."

"These occurrences confirm my idea that you have a little private war on your hands," Willard said.

"It looks that way. Still, Johnson and Farrington, the two bankers, loaned me two hundred thousand willingly. Of course they wanted everything for security at first, but finally agreed to accept two hundred and fifty thousand of stock as collateral—

half of the company issue. I refused to put up a mortgage."

"The stock would please them better, anyway," Willard remarked. "They will try to grab it and squeeze you out."

"If that's their scheme let them proceed; we'll make it warm for them before they're done. But certainly they wouldn't engineer these criminal attacks."

"No, Johnson and Farrington don't operate that way—they use purely legal means of robbery. Somebody else is responsible for your yard troubles. About when did they begin?"

"Early in March—immediately after I secured my loan. There does appear an obscure connection between the two facts."

"Rest assured the two bankers have nothing to do with your accidents and so on. The question is: Who is causing them—and why?"

"Somebody else may be after the business," Stokes mused, "and thinks to get it by scuttling us and forcing us on the rocks. Well, we didn't start this plant for local vultures to pick. If it's to be war, we'll make it the real thing!

"Let us go back to the office. I'll give an order to-day to have the yard strung with electric lights and the guards armed with shotguns; Mocket, my bookkeeper, can get a permit this afternoon for firearms here."

"Place a detective or two among the workmen to learn who is supplying the money," Willard suggested.

"Yes, I'll do that. I'll send to an agency for them to-day or to-morrow. They should be able to get wind of things."

At the office door, after a few more words, Willard stepped into the motor-car that awaited him there.

"Make them pay for their fun," said he. "I'm running up to Chicago and Detroit for a few days, but when I return I'll look into this affair a bit myself."

And he was driven away.

About two o'clock that afternoon a plank fell from a low scaffolding being erected about the frame of the second ship. Stokes chanced to be passing underneath at the instant and it struck him to the earth.

Workmen carried him to the office, where a doctor and ambulance were hastily summoned. Though the fall of the plank had not been great, it was sufficient to break his collar-bone and left arm, besides dealing him a severe, glancing blow upon the head.

He had regained consciousness before the arrival of the physician, and given his stenographer, despite his pain, instructions of a private nature regarding the business. Then he was rushed to his home.

CHAPTER III.

ENTER BOB STOKES.

If it were possible to observe the course of a telegraphed communication as a visible phenomenon, a message that began at Martinsport might have been seen as a succession of flashes between points sparking its way from city to city, in long leaps, up and up northwest, across the continent until it ended in a final flash in Seattle.

There a man in an office read the message and took down a telephone receiver. Back in the timber of the Cascade Range, in a small heavily-wooded little valley, another man answered the ring.

He in turn went to the door and called across to the cook-shack. The cook replied, yelled to a youngster outside, put a doughnut in his hand when he ran up, spoke a word of instruction, and shooed the little boy out of the shack.

"Now skip—make your feet fly!" he commanded. "Tell Bob Stokes that Mac says he's wanted at the telephone in a hurry. You'll find him down where they're loading cars. Don't fool by the way, or I'll warm your pants with a butter-paddle. Run!"

The lad trotted off, stuffing his mouth as he went. Five minutes later a tall, tanned, blue-eyed young fellow strode up the slope and entered the office. The still more youthful bookkeeper nodded his head toward the telephone.

"Hurry-up call from J. C., Bob," he stated.

"All right. Probably about that extra-length stuff he wants."

He crossed to the telephone, gave the handle a spin, and called for the Seattle office connection. Then he lighted a cigarette while waiting, stuck a toe into the stomach of a cat lying just by his feet and wiggled it there, then rolled his eyes about upon the boyish bookkeeper.

"When was the divorce, Mac?" he inquired.

"What divorce?" The bookkeeper regarded him suspiciously.

"I perceive that the missives you're getting this week are incased in baby-pink envelopes, while those you've been having were in blue. And the handwriting on them also appears strange and weird. Hence, a new dame!"

A bright color appeared in the other's cheeks.

"By golly, a fellow can't have even a new girl without the whole camp knowing it!" he exclaimed.

"Pretty?"

"Some apple, Bob, believe me! Met her last time I was down, and after the first look I fell for her like a thousand of brick!"

"But where, oh, where was Annie?"

"Annie, your boot!" was the disgusted reply. "The other's name wasn't Annie but Seraphina. She ditched me for—"

"Hold!" Stokes ordered. "Say that name again and say it slowly. Seraph—I'll bet, with a handle like that, she is as short and dumpy as one of Bill's puddings."

The bookkeeper sniffed disdainfully.

"You lose. She was thin and—and—mercenary! I started to tell you she ditched me for a fellow with a yellow auto. Ditched me cold, after all the money I'd spent too."

Stokes shook his head sadly, the telephone receiver still held to his ear.

"Heartless, fickle woman!" quoth he. "But I suppose the new one is as sincere as she's beautiful, especially when the girly is gazing soulfully over her nut sundae into Mac's burning orbs as he relates his hairbreadth adventures up here in the woods."

"Go to the devil!" the boy ejaculated with a red face.

With eyes fixed upon the ceiling Stokes continued in a declamatory voice:

"Ah, those tender looks! Ah, those blissful drug-store romances, half heartache, half soda-water fizz! I've been there, my son; I've known the same sweet sorrow. I've shivered with that same mixture of joy and ice-cream.

"Hello, that you, John? What's that—hurt? Yes, I can go at once. As soon as I shake myself out of these clothes and boots I'll hop into my car and start down. I'll be in town in three hours if I come in on one wheel.

"Tough luck for Fred. Hope to Heaven it's no more than busted bones, though that's bad enough. Might have killed the old boy. All right; see to my ticket and Pullman. I'll be there by six—or know why."

He clapped the receiver in place and turned to the bookkeeper, who had listened with growing concern on his face.

"What happened to F. W.?" he asked quickly.

"Broken shoulder—accident. I'm starting for Martinsport immediately. Hustle out and bring Barney so I can give him a last word; then bring my car to the door, please.

"I'll have to change my clothes and run through the papers in my desk. Must be away from here in fifteen minutes."

At the end of that period both Barney, the woods boss, and the runabout awaited him. To the former he gave a number of instructions.

"J. C. will be running up here often," he said, "and he'll keep in touch with you constantly by phone. Mac, explain to Aitken. Tell him to keep sawing the stuff he's on; I haven't a moment more to spare or I'd see him myself. You can explain.

"Keep J. C. advised of everything—he'll doubtless be along immediately. Look over the commissary lists with Jorgensen that I was going to check up. And find out why that new saw isn't here, and give the railroad a poke.

"Barney, keep the men driving on the trees. Better shift the log-track where we talked. If Pete's leg doesn't appear to get healed, as it should, send him down to a hospital, and tell him not to worry about the cost.

"Well, I'm starting. It's up to you boys to make the lumber spout. Luck with you!" And off he drove, waving a hand behind.

As good as his word he reached Seattle by six, finding his brother awaiting him in the company offices.

John Stokes, the elder of the three brothers, and known as J. C., was about thirty-eight—ten years older than Bob.

Both he and Frederick Stokes sometimes jokingly called the young fellow a "family after-thought," but were exceedingly proud of the strong, active, hustling junior—Stokes Brothers was considered a coming firm, with shrewdness and nerve and "pep."

"You can leave to-night and be in Martinsport in four days, if you make train-connections," J. C. said after Bob had read the telegram announcing the accident to their brother. "I had Voss look up the time-tables and schedule the best route.

"If there had been any way to arrange the matter I should have gone myself, but I'm up to my neck in deals here. Anyway, a few days would have done no good. Fred may be laid up two or three months."

"Yes, I'm the one to go," Bob answered. "What's this about something in his last letters that you spoke of over the phone?"

The older man adjusted his nose-glasses and drew toward him a file of correspondence.

"These letters came this week," said he; "the last one only this morning, so you haven't seen them. Fred writes of the trouble with men he's been having and of the numerous accidents in the yard. States they're apparently malicious; his superintendent thinks so, at any rate.

"Is convinced some one's deliberately injuring the company, but isn't sure whether it's German agents or aggrieved workmen—or who. Take the correspondence along with you and read it on the train. You can mail it back from some point along the road."

"Very well. Somebody dropped the board on Fred intentionally, then—the wire says a falling plank hit him."

"Wouldn't be surprised if his suspicions in the matter are right. But no disgruntled workman would be responsible in the sense the word implies.

"As Fred lists the occurrences in his letters, it looks like a systematic campaign of attack by the I. W. W.'s. But by what he's learned none of the workmen is in that outfit. So somebody else is behind it."

"Perhaps German agents, as the superintendent suggests," Bob said at once.

"Well, that's what you'll have to find out. Perhaps Fred will be able to tell you something more if he's able to talk when you arrive. If not, you'll have to dig it out.

"There may be another explanation: Fred wrote when he first went down that there was apparent hostility to us by some local people, because we had picked up the only shipyard site.

"Not likely they would start anything as raw as trying to sandbag our business, but bear the fact in mind.

"You'll have to consider every possibility and run down every clue. And if any one is really making a dirty, underhanded fight, look out for yourself—he'll try to get you as he got Fred."

"Let him—or they, or it, whichever it is," Bob snapped out. "Let 'em try it; I can use the rough stuff too. But what the deuce would any persons besides enemy agents want to put us down and out for?"

The older brother tapped the desk with his forefinger.

"To get our business—bankrupt us, break us, lay us flat, and then secure the assets of the concern far below what they are worth.

"Martinsport, no doubt, realizes by now that we've a little mint there. Any man who stops to figure will see that the profits of the first two boats will pay back every dollar of capital invested, and after that everything will be velvet."

"Well, I've been up in the timber and haven't given the ship end of it much thought," Bob remarked. "Where's the pinch? How can any one nip us?"

"We borrowed two hundred thousand down there."

"Yes, I know. Go ahead."

"Our credit here was about all used in

swinging the purchase of that big Oregon tract of timber we bought. When Fred learned definitely he could get the money he needed at Martinsport, why, we went ahead and bought the tract.

" That left us just enough cash to keep the business going in good shape until we could begin to cut some of the new stuff and realize."

" I remember."

" But with everything tied up, we'll be able to pay the Martinsport loan only when the first ship is sold. The loan will fall due about a month after Fred's scheduled date for completion of the vessel."

" The light begins to glimmer in my brain," said Bob.

" His recent letters report that because of the delays, accidents, and so on, which he believed engineered, the work was dropping behind schedule. And now he's clear out of the game, probably strapped up in a plaster-cast.

" Things will be kept moving, of course, by those in charge, but not as if Fred were on hand. If a ship is not finished and sold, we'll have a note of two hundred thousand to meet and no money, unless we let go the timber again."

" We need that timber; we'll not let go of that," said Bob.

" No. And we can't raise anything on it at present. It's carrying a good load as it is. Once our mill is into the stuff the money will come in fast enough at prices that lumber is bringing and will continue to bring.

" That was a good buy; we must hang on to it. So it's up to you to see that first ship is launched."

" As I remember, the loan was made on a stock collateral, not by a mortgage," Bob reflected.

" Yes—I've not forgotten that. But Fred didn't want to mortgage it. Of course, we can if it comes to a last shot, though if it becomes known some one's injuring our property it will be more difficult.

" And there's a chance, too, of selling a ship on a substantial payment down before it's finished since competition for ships is brisk.

" I didn't say any one could break us—I'm explaining the state of affairs in case that is some person's object. But we might have to do some lively financing at the last minute if we made no provision."

Bob smiled, then finally laughed.

" You always do make provision, though," said he. " The way you're reciting the ' pros ' and ' cons ' shows me you've been employing a few minutes of spare time in cogitations."

For a moment John Stokes also smiled.

" Since receiving Fred's letters, yes," said he, " and since getting the telegram this afternoon I've given my mind to the subject.

" Fred, I imagine, has had something ready in case the holders of our notes tried to take any undue advantage of the situation; he hinted as much when the loan was made.

" You'll find out and let me know what it is. I think I can guarantee that Stokes Brothers will continue to do business right along."

Bob suddenly jumped up and began to stride to and fro across the room.

" Do you think the men who loaned this money are making us the trouble? Could they be such damned ruffians as to have Fred laid out cold by a plank, as he was, to gain their ends?" he demanded.

" You're going there to learn, as I already stated."

" I'll find out, never worry. Somebody shall pay for nearly killing him—it might have killed him. I'll discover who it was if I have to use a fine comb on the whole town. No one can put across a dirty, murderous trick like that on Fred and not pay for it."

" Right, Bob. We'll sharpen our knives, and if the thing was really deliberate the man shall pay dearly for it," John Stokes affirmed with a sudden compression of his lips. " There's only one treatment for bushwhackers!"

All at once Bob stopped in his stride.

" The men who loaned the money were bankers, I recall," he said. " Isn't that right?"

" Yes."

" Then surely they wouldn't be such scoundrels!"

"One finds it difficult to believe so. We'll give them the benefit of the doubt until you discover the culprits. But, in any case, we'll be prepared so that they can't take advantage of us, even if they're not mixed up in it. They might feel so disposed."

"Possibly it's German agents, after all."

"No telling. But trust no one but Fred—and Willard. Do you remember him? No, I don't believe you ever made his acquaintance.

"He gave us the tip on the ship business there and sold us the site. Used to know father, and has dropped in here at the office occasionally when he's in the West. Interested with the West Coast Mill and Development people."

"Big man, then?"

"Yes. Has several number concerns in the South and other interests over the country. He lives in Detroit, but spends a good deal of time in Martinsport because of the climate. Outside of him there's no one.

"Now, I think that's about all. We'll go up to dinner, for Martha and the kiddies are expecting you, of course, to say goodby.

"Martha has a lot of messages for you to carry to Alice, who'll be distracted by Fred's injuries. We can talk a bit more after eating, then you'll have time to pack your trunk and the like. Train leaves at ten-fifteen."

He arose and pulled shut the roller-top of his desk.

"Where's Jim Flanagan — Snohomish Jim?" Bob asked all at once.

"Cruising in No. 3 tract."

"When will he finish?"

"In two or three days. He's nearly through, I judge."

"Can you spare him, John?" Bob inquired meditatively.

"I guess so. Was going to send him down to run through the Oregon timber again. What about him?"

Pausing to light his pipe, Bob gathered up the correspondence which he was to read on the train and stuffed it in his pocket.

"Send him along down after me when he comes in," he said. "I'll put him on as a carpenter, and if he doesn't nose out something I miss my guess.

"Tell him he's to find the fellow who got Fred—that's all that will be necessary. He's particularly fond of Fred. He can hammer nails, I suppose."

"Enough to pass, I think."

Bob nodded.

"Jim's the man I want. Have him shuck off his woods togs and make up as a carpenter. Better tell him to lay in a supply of palm-leaf fans too, as he's going where it's warm.

"Ticket him through, and he'll show up all right, even if he does cross a few wet States; he always arrives on time, drunk or sober."

"I'll see him properly started," John smiled.

The two brothers departed. It was nearly seven o'clock as they left the building, and the homeward flow of folk had subsided, leaving the streets deserted.

At the telegraph stand, near the elevators in the entrance of the building, they turned aside to despatch a message to the Martinsport office, notifying it of Bob's leaving, and another to Fred's wife.

"Two wires for you just came in," the operator informed John Stokes. And he passed them across the counter.

"From Alice. Says Fred resting easy," John stated, handing the first to his brother.

"Good boy! I'll bet he'll disgust the doctor by getting well and whole again in double-quick time."

His satisfaction was quick to appear. He clucked his tongue between his teeth, clapped his brother John on the shoulder, and added a word about no one being able to kill a Stokes with a mere piece of lumber, the Stokes family having invented lumber.

"This one is from the office," John said, who had been scanning the second telegram.

"Here it is: 'Imperative another member firm come Martinsport immediately have just learned injunction pending to tie up plant will engage lawyer to try prevent it and will keep work going till arrival answer—E. Durand.'

" Time you were getting down there, Bob," John continued, with his jaw growing hard. " Not satisfied with laying Fred out with a lot of broken bones, whoever's managing this conspiracy is going to jump us and garrote us legally, too, if he can, along with his other dirty work.

" At any rate, a suit will give you a chance to find out who is concerned, if you probe deep enough. Damn 'em, once we get our claws on their windpipes there'll be no mercy!"

" None, none. We go the full limit now," Bob answered, " both ways and across."

" And don't hesitate to draw for any money you'll want. Wire me, that's all. I'll see that you have it. And keep me advised every day; do the wiring yourself in our private code. I'm not going to sit idle."

Bob read the second telegram over again.

" Who's this Durand?" he inquired.

" Office man, I guess. Appears efficient and not afraid of responsibility, by his messages. He sent the first, of the accident."

" I'll buy him a cigar and raise his salary for this," said Bob. " He deserves it for standing up to the fight."

CHAPTER IV.

" E. DURAND."

THE wall clock in the outer office of Stokes Brothers had just struck four when Robert Stokes opened the screen door and entered. The offices were in the end nearest the shipyard-gate of a long, low building covered with galvanized iron, the greater part of which was used as a warehouse.

On his arrival in Martinsport Stokes had gone immediately to his brother's dwelling, where to his immense relief he found Frederick suffering no injuries beyond those broken bones, and elated that he had come.

An hour's discussion of business before luncheon, and another parley afterward of equal length—the limit set by the doctor—resulted in Bob's going down-town and despatching a long telegram to John Stokes at Seattle. Bob had then pursued his way to the shipyard.

As he advanced to the counter that fenced off half the office, he directed an appraising glance about. It had the usual furnishings of such a place. A few chairs stood outside the counter; inside were filing-cases, safe, tables, and the like.

On a high stool a thin, middle-aged man worked at a ledger lying open on a tall desk before him. He did not look up at Stokes's entrance, but continued to ply his pen steadily and smoothly, showing only his profile.

Standing by the safe and gazing morosely out of a window was a second person, a short, bullet-headed young fellow.

He presently turned his head about to view the visitor, without troubling to remove his hands from his trouser-pockets or to alter his position. Neither his features nor his apparel impressed Stokes favorably.

His forehead was low, his ears prominent, and a half-smoked cigarette hung from his lower lip. A scowl, apparently at the interruption to his thoughts, darkened his face as he eyed the stranger. He wore a pink shirt, the sleeves rolled to his elbows, a flaring yellow-and-green striped scarf, and trousers of bright blue serge—a color-scheme of crashing violence beside the plain black of the bookkeeper, or Stokes's own simple gray.

Stokes pushed back his straw hat and scrutinized the other. A suspicion had instantly begun to eddy in his mind. If the firm's enemies had a tool inside the shipyard, this fellow was in all probability the man.

He had all the earmarks of one who would sell his employers out for money. He was in the office, where he knew what was being done and could pass on the information. Without directly acting himself, he could advise the plotters so that they might prepare and carry out their veiled attacks.

Bob felt a quick beat of satisfaction; he had opened up a lead the minute he had set foot in the shipyard.

The other spoke.

" Nothing doing. Not buying anything to-day," he said.

The utterance was manifestly intended to forestall and dispose of any salesmanship line of talk. He had evidently decided Stokes had something to sell. And, moreover, in his present sour spirits he viewed the other's cheerful mien with strong disfavor.

"Are you the manager here?" Stokes inquired.

"No."

"What is your official position, then?"

"I'm a clerk—and nothing official about it, either."

At this minute the bookkeeper laid down his pen and swung about on his stool. He wore nose-glasses, through which he peered at Stokes with the vague fixity of the nearsighted. These and his thin, serious face gave him the aspect of professorial gravity, in marked contrast to the youth's air of pugnacious gloom. But he gave no indication of interjecting himself into the discussion.

Bob Stokes placed his hat upon the counter, drew forth a handkerchief, and wiped the perspiration from his face.

"So you're not buying anything today?" he remarked.

"No."

"Well, what are you doing for Stokes Brothers besides dragging at that cigarette on your lip?" Bob inquired.

The other thrust out his jaw and drew down his bullet-head as if he were about to butt.

"Say, are you trying to start something around here?" he demanded in a hostile tone.

"I'll decide that presently." Stokes tossed one of his business-cards upon the counter. After you've taken a look at that. And if I start something, I'll finish it. Now step up here and glue your glim on this pasteboard, and learn that courtesy is as necessary in an office as ink — even to a man with something to sell. Stokes Brothers, for that matter, sell things, too."

"Humph," the clerk grunted.

After a first surprised stare on hearing Bob's speech he advanced doggedly, picked up the card, and read the name engraved on it. For a little his expression retained its obstinacy, as if he did not catch the card's full significance; then his neck and face and ears went bright crimson.

He laid the card down.

"You're right," said he. "And I've tied a can on myself."

He began to roll down his sleeves with a sort of determination. As he crossed to a hook and took down his coat and hat, Stokes watched him interestedly.

"Where are you going?" he asked.

"To look for a new job. I'm fired, ain't I?"

"Not by me."

The clerk gazed at him in bewilderment.

"You mean you're keeping me after that talk I handed you, Mr. Stokes?"

"We can use you yet, I guess."

The other continued to stare while the fact percolated through his brain. In one hand he held his hat, in the other his coat trailing on the floor. He looked as if he had received a jolt between the eyes.

"Huh, I thought I'd queered myself for good," said he.

"Well, you haven't—yet."

The slight intonation of the last word went unheeded by the clerk. Under ordinary circumstances Stokes might have let him proceed on his way unstopped, but convinced as he was that the young fellow was worth watching, he resolved to retain him for purposes of observation.

"Much obliged to you, Mr. Stokes; I'll remember what you said about courtesy," the youth stated, somewhat sheepishly.

"All right, Andrews—your name is Andrews, I think."

"Yes, sir. Bill Andrews."

"And yours, Mocket?" Stokes added, turning to the bookkeeper.

The latter lowered himself from his stool, removed his nose-glasses, and walked forward.

"Pleased to make your acquaintance, Mr. Stokes," he said, extending a hand. "We were not aware you had arrived. It was a very unfortunate accident that occurred to your brother; he's resting comfortably, I understand."

With his glasses off he looked a trifle younger. The seriousness of his lean, smooth-shaven face was relieved by the black brilliancy of his eyes that was not lessened by their impaired vision. His hair, thinned in front in premature baldness, Stokes observed, partly accounted for his ascetic appearance.

Stokes chatted with him a few minutes of his brother's condition, at the same time noting that Andrews, who had hung up his coat and hat again, continued to stare his way in contemplative silence, his hands once more in his pockets, his head lowered in bulldog-fashion. Bob renewed his resolution to smoke out that young fellow.

Presently he nodded to Mocket and moved toward the door of the inner room.

There was a faint, hurried swish of skirts as he approached it.

When he stepped inside, a young lady sat at a typewriter-desk in apparent absorption in a letter, but with evident signs of just that instant having seated herself. Stokes was confident that she had barely gained the chair before his entrance. For one thing, there was a suspicious pink in her face.

" I heard you, so you needn't pretend to have been reading that letter," he said, grinning. " You had hopped over to the door when Andrews and I were exchanging ideas, ready to burst out and stop the mêlée if there were one. Isn't that the case, Miss Durand? You're Miss Durand, of course, who sent the telegrams?"

The color in the girl's cheeks had heightened as she was apprized of the failure of her retreat. In some embarrassment she arose and shook hands with Stokes.

" Well, I was there, yes," she acknowledged. " But I wasn't hiding, as might appear. Mr. Andrews didn't know who you were, while I did—I knew you were coming. So when he started to argue, I jumped up to tell him your name. I reached the door and was standing in it as he read your card, but neither of you were looking my way. Then I just remained to hear what you had to say regarding your brother—we've all been anxious about him, you know. Then I realized what you might think if you saw me there in the door listening, and—and retired."

" I'd have thought it nothing out of the way at all," Bob assured her.

" It wouldn't have appeared polite, at any rate," said she.

One would not have called her in the least pretty—that is, pretty in the sense the word is so frequently used to indicate soft regularity of features, without character.

Her black hair was thick and rebellious, especially about her small, fine ears; her dark eyes glowed from beneath brows level and heavy; her lips were of a warm red, but with a little, curious upward twitch at one corner. It was this tiny quirk of the mouth that drew one's attention. It gave the face a subtle animation. One grew expectant at seeing it, with an aroused interest, and was impelled to lift a look to her eyes to seek a meaning.

Bob Stokes seated himself near by.

" My brother tells me that you've been the real manager here since he was injured," he stated. " And I shall write to J. C. at Seattle that E. Durand, who sent those very businesslike wires, is not a young man at all, as we had supposed."

And he smiled as he recalled his words to his brother John, that he would buy a cigar for the sender of the messages and give a raise in salary. Well, he would see to the salary increase, at any rate.

" I've not been exactly the boss," said she, " but I've helped a bit in keeping the wheels moving until you came. The correspondence, however, has been largely routine; here are some letters I'm getting out now."

She laid her hand on a pile of sheets resting beside her machine.

" We had a good supply of material on hand, fortunately, when Mr. Frederick Stokes was hurt, and in addition Mr. Mulhouse, the superintendent, has told me what was needed and I ordered it. And, finally, I hired and fired a few men, using the common term."

" Hiring and firing is the test of whether one's the boss," he rejoined with a flicker of amusement.

" The authority didn't actually rest in me, though," she went on. " You see, it's Mr. Mulhouse's business to employ and discharge workmen, and I only approved formally what he did when he reported the removals. He knew, of course, I was just rubber-stamping them with an O. K."

The odd twitch at the corner of her

mouth deepened as if she were about to laugh, or exclaim, or put a question—Bob Stokes could not tell which.

But instead of doing any one of the three, she remained gazing at him with a veiled, dusky look in her eyes, utterly at variance with the rest of her expression, apparently taking stock of this new member of the company and forming unvoiced, private conclusions regarding him and his ability to step into his brother's shoes.

Bob glanced about the room.

"That's Frederick's desk yonder, I suppose," said he. "I'll use it." He arose, went to the door, which he closed. "Now we'll get busy. What about this lawsuit you wired of?" he asked, when he had returned. "Has it been started? My brother appeared not to know about it, for he did not speak of it in our talk. Nor did I mention it, as it would cause him only useless worry. You learned of it since he was hurt, I judge, or about the time, since your telegram was despatched the same day. Is that correct?"

"Yes. That noon. I intended to inform Mr. Stokes of what I had accidentally heard, but did not get to do so before his mishap."

"Accidentally, you say?"

"Quite by chance," she nodded. "A woman of the name of Gaudreault had been doing some sewing for me. Her little boy brought the things home that noon and began talking, saying that his mother would sew no more for anybody soon when they were rich. I was amused.

"I asked him if they were going to be very rich, and he said yes, that his father had found out he owned the ground the shipyard was on and had hired a lawyer to get it. At that, I set out to learn all about the matter. A lawyer had been coming to their house and telling them of the thing, he said.

"The boy was not very clear, but I discovered enough to know a suit was contemplated on the ground of the man being the rightful heir, or because of imperfect title, or something of that kind. But no suit has yet been brought against the company. I've telephoned the court-house every day and been ready to engage an attorney the instant I knew it had been begun."

"I'll look into the matter. Thank you for protecting our interests so carefully. Now, tell me, have any more accidents occurred in the yard since my brother's absence?"

"Nothing of importance, Mr. Stokes."

The young fellow reflected for a little time.

"You were in my brother's confidence to the degree of knowing his opinion about what's going on here, Miss Durand, because he dictated to you the private letters he wrote our office at Seattle. What do you think about it?"

Her face grew more serious. She hesitated before speaking.

"As Mr. Frederick Stokes stated the case in the correspondence, his view was very convincing," she said. "I've thought about the matter a great deal since he was hurt — and been uneasy. I'm greatly relieved that you're here. And something did happen here to make me anxious. Not an accident, but something else."

A shadow of perplexity appeared upon her face, and she stared past him in a sudden intentness of thought.

"Yes, I'm quite sure about it."

"What occurred?" he asked.

"It was the letter-files there." She pointed at the cases. "Two nights ago some one went through them. I always straighten them at the end of the day, leaving them in order. When I opened one of the files yesterday morning, the envelopes in it did not look exactly as they should. A few of them were sticking up more than I ever have them; very little, but yet more. One notices a change like that, or perhaps feels it. You could tell if some one had moved things in your desk, couldn't you?"

"Yes," Stokes replied.

"Well, that was how I knew. And on running through the envelopes I found a letter or two displaced."

"Anything gone?"

"Not that I could discover."

"Were Frederick's confidential letters there?"

The girl shook her head.

"Mr. Stokes took home that correspondence. He said any one who had a mind to could pry open one of these windows. But the windows had not been tampered with, so far as I could find."

"Have you any suspicion who ransacked the files?"

Involuntarily her eyes sought the door into the outer office. Then glancing back and perceiving his look on her, she showed a trace of confusion. Afterward she busied herself tucking up the hair about her ears.

"No," said she finally.

"Are those men out there trustworthy?" he inquired. "How about Mocket?" She shook her head. "Well, Andrews?"

Her lips were compressed and her hands continued busy with her hair. She was not looking at Stokes.

"No," said she, with a swift, furtive glance upward.

"They have keys to the building, of course."

"But not to this door."

Stokes arose and sauntered to one of the windows. He seemed to hear an expelled breath, as of relief. He could almost feel her eyes, veiled by their long, black lashes, gazing inscrutably at his back. Her manner when he spoke of Andrews refuted her words—but why was she shielding him?

He stared thoughtfully through the open window at the eastern pier. A gentle wind was blowing toward the shipyard. Suddenly he swung about with a dark face. She drew back, showing a flutter of alarm.

"What's this awful smell I'm getting?" he demanded.

The alarm died out of her eyes; she broke into a laugh.

"Rotting oyster-shells at the canneries. You gave me a scare—I thought you had seen something terrible."

"I don't need to see it, I smell it," said he.

CHAPTER V.

GAUDREAULT—AND BROUSSARD.

BEFORE work stopped that afternoon Bob Stokes made a tour of the yard. He knew nothing about building ships. He knew that he knew nothing about shipbuilding. However, Mulhouse, the superintendent, an oldish New Englander, possessed in a high degree the knowledge of constructing wooden vessels, that almost forgotten but suddenly revived craft; and that was all the business needed.

The task confronting the young fellow was of a different character.

He must fend off future attacks upon the plant and, if possible, run the plotters out into the broad light of day.

He located Mulhouse overseeing work on the newer of the boats. After making himself known and chatting for a time on cursory subjects, Bob drew the superintendent aside.

"My brother tells me you believe as he does," said he, "that the delays and accidents, including his own, which have occurred here are the result of deliberate planning."

Mulhouse pulled his gray beard and nodded.

"No question of some one causing the trouble," he stated.

"Nothing has happened since he was hurt, though?"

"No, but I'm expecting a jab most any time. They may try to get you or me next."

"You're no wiser yet as to who dropped the plank on my brother, I take it?"

"No. Haven't an inkling. There's always more or less loose lumber lying about on the scaffolds. A fellow could give a board a shove off with his foot as F. W. went along underneath and be at work again in an instant. The other men, being busy, wouldn't see."

"There can be no large number of men disloyal to our interests, or you would know it, wouldn't you?"

"Yes. It would become known. We've discharged several, those responsible for delays," Mulhouse said. "I doubt if there are more than two or three in the pay of the outsiders, and they have a leader, of course. I still have a feeling, Mr. Stokes, that there's some German alien's hand in this, though your brother's opinion was different. I'm watching a man or two."

Bob Stokes observed for a little the carpenters at work on the skeleton hull. An incessant hammering went on along the length of the vessel; the intermittent screech of a planer sounded from somewhere off in the yard; there came an occasional dull clap of dropped boards.

" F. W. has an idea he wants us to try out," he remarked presently. " He's been thinking conditions over since he's been laid up, and believes the way to prevent further trouble is to enlist the workmen on our side."

Mulhouse drew out a pocket-knife. He bent and picked up a stick, began to whittle.

" Go ahead," said he.

" There are some of the foremen, and also workmen, whom you know to be trustworthy. The names of a few of them probably come into your mind at once."

" Yes."

" Well, Frederick's plan is to tell them confidentially what we suspect and set them to work among the men. They in turn will know others who can be trusted.

" And the scheme looks good.

" When they realize that it's their bread and butter that's really being endangered by these insidious attempts to destroy the plant, they will rally to catch the traitors. They'll be guards as well as workmen.

" Their ears and eyes will be open for anything that looks suspicious; and if we don't in time lay hands on the men we want I'm badly mistaken."

Mulhouse finished carefully shaving his stick to a fine point. Then he tossed it down, closed his knife, looked at his watch, and jerked a thumb toward the yard-gate.

" It's quitting time in five minutes," he announced. " There are seven men I think of now whom we'll want. I'll go around and give them a quiet word to busy themselves at something until the other fellows have gone, then to join me at the office."

" This spot here is better. No need of Andrews or Mocket knowing anything about it," said Stokes. " How long does it take the yard to empty out?"

" Fifteen or twenty minutes."

" All right. I'll be around then."

Bob returned to the office. Mocket was putting his account-book in the safe. Andrews was in the inner office, helping Miss Durand seal and stamp the letters she had typed. At Stokes's entrance he showed a little embarrassment, but went on with the work until the envelopes were finished.

" I was not sure you were still here," the girl said, " so I signed the correspondence, as I've been doing heretofore. I usually take it up-town when I go, to mail in the post-office."

" That's right. I didn't wish to begin on office matters until to-morrow."

Andrews stood by holding the letters, a slight cloud on his face, not looking at Stokes, but conscious, nevertheless, of the other's gaze resting on him. The girl glanced once or twice at the pair while closing her desk, then went to a closet for her hat. Here and there over the city whistles began to blow. The shipyard ceased to resound with the noise of labor as if by magic.

The girl came forward, giving a last push to a pin in her hat.

" I'm ready, Mr. Andrews." Addressing Stokes, she said: " If you'll pull the door close when you go out it will lock itself. I'll snap on the spring now. Good evening, Mr. Stokes."

" Good evening," he replied.

Andrews nodded, but did not speak. The two passed out. Stokes walked slowly to the doorway, staring where the young fellow had followed the girl out.

" Humph," said he.

" Were you speaking to me?" Mocket inquired, turning about from giving the knob of the safe a whirl.

" No, I wasn't saying anything in particular," Bob stated.

The cashier placed his straw hat on his head, tucked away his eye-glasses in their case. His spare, black-garbed figure appeared thinner than ever.

" I hope you will find the South enjoyable, Mr. Stokes," he said before departing. " But after a city the size of Seattle, you'll find Martinsport dull, I imagine."

" The shipyard will keep me too busy to notice it, in all probability."

" Possibly. But there are few amusements, in any case."

The statement stirred a faint interest in Stokes. Mocket looked like a person whose amusements would end with a picture-show and perhaps a lecture-course and that would be the extent of it.

The workmen were streaming out the gate when Bob stepped forth from the building.

They were a solid, intelligent, industrious-looking body of men, on the whole, and supported the belief that they would respond to an appeal to aid in stamping treachery out of the plant.

Strains of French, German, Scandinavian blood appeared here and there in faces that were equally dependable as those of their fellows. Groups of negroes—lumber-handlers, roustabouts, and the like—laughing and joking among themselves, made a part of the number.

Altogether, they formed the mixed, sturdy, honest class of toilers that constitutes the mass of loyal Americans; and at the sight Bob Stokes felt new confidence.

About eight o'clock that evening Bob approached a house on a side street in a quarter of the town where small and somewhat shabby cottages predominated. Though it was after sunset, it was still light.

Observing the numbers of the dwellings as he proceeded, he at last halted before one whose meager front yard was grassless and littered with the refuse of slattern housekeeping. The gate hung by a single hinge. Several dirty children squabbled and played just inside. Entering, he advanced and knocked on the door.

To his inquiry for Mr. Gaudreault a worn and untidy woman, with a babe in her arms, responded that her husband had just gone down-town. He had just gone, she repeated. She even accompanied Bob to the gate and pointed along the street, where a man some distance away could be seen.

"That is him, see," she said. "He goes on business."

The words were uttered with extreme satisfaction.

"I can overtake him," Stokes said; and thanked her.

"You are a lawyer, eh? Perhaps about the lawsuit?" she inquired with a cunning smile. Then she turned to cuff a child who pulled at her skirt.

"Oh, no. I'm no lawyer; I only hire labor," Stokes replied.

"Jean, he's now working on Simmons's boat, shrimping." She gave a shake of her head. "No, he's not for hire this time."

"Then he can't be had."

"No—he's shrimping."

Stokes moved away from the house at a leisurely pace, until by a look over his shoulder he perceived the woman had retired from the gate, when he fell into a rapid stride.

The figure of Gaudreault was three squares in advance of him, but Bob rapidly cut down the intervening space. When the woman's husband came upon the main business street he was but a scant half-square behind. He gradually reduced the distance until the man was but a few paces in front.

The fellow was short and stocky, of medium age. At one corner he loitered to exchange a word with an acquaintance, at the same time lighting a cigarette. Bob passed him and paused in a doorway.

Presently, flinging a word back at his friend and showing his white teeth under his silky black mustache, the man proceeded along the street, on which the evening crowd was idly strolling. Once the fellow halted before a "movie" show, studying the lithographs of a girl leaping from a moving freight-train; again he stopped before a plate-glass window to adjust his tie and cock his vivid-green hat.

But at last he entered the corridor of a new, six-story office building, where, since the elevators had ceased running, he began to mount the stair.

He went no higher than the first flight. Bob heard his feet cross the hall, then came the faint echoing sound of a knock, then the opening and closing of a door. Three steps at a time Stokes sprang lightly up after him.

When he arrived at the top, he halted to listen. For a time he heard nothing, but presently thought that he distinguished muffled tones.

Across from him appeared to be a suite of rooms, apparently spacious and constituting the offices of one person; at any rate, on one door only appeared a name. It was not until the fourth door down the hall on that side that other names were in evidence.

Tiptoeing across until he stood under the open transom of the door, he made out that two men were talking. The speech of one was measured, composed, that of the other brief and respectful—Gaudreault's.

Now and again a word or scrap of a sentence floated out to the hearer, but beyond perceiving that the discussion was of the lawsuit and Gaudreault and the shipyard, Stokes was unable to follow the talk, which was conducted at the opposite end of the room.

After some fifteen minutes he heard the speakers drawing near. Slipping along the wall, he gained the stair leading to the floor above and crouched upon it.

The door opened.

"Remember carefully what you're to do, Gaudreault," said a voice.

"Yes, yes. I make no mistake."

"Then tell me," the first continued.

'Ver' well. I go to Johnson's bank and beg to borrow five hundred dollars. When I am refuse, I beg to see Mr. Johnson, who ask me why I want so much money. Then I say because I own shipyard and will be rich. So, eh?"

"*Tres bon,* Jean. To-day is Tuesday; you will go to the bank Friday."

"And when will the lawyer get a move on him, ha?"

"Saturday, I think. He should be ready to file the suit by then. And tell your woman again not to gossip to any one of it, understand?"

"Yes, yes, yes!"

"When you've been to the bank, then do nothing more. That's all for to-night. And mind, it's always the lawyer and you in this suit—never mention my name! Deny it if Johnson or any one else tries to pump you."

A laugh came from Gaudreault's lips.

"I will put it across 'em on that," he declared.

He scuffled across the hallway and went clattering down the stair. His erstwhile companion remained unmoving until Gaudreault's feet passed off the pavement of the corridor below, then he exclaimed, "Ye gods, what rank stuff that fellow smokes!" and reentered the room.

Stokes lifted his head, discovering that the door had been left open. He dared not risk a retreat in the face of that. But his wait was not long; five minutes later he heard the occupant step forth, close the door behind him, and go down to the street.

Bob hastened after him when assured it was safe. At the curb outside a slender gentleman with a dark, striking face, wearing a Vandyke tinged with gray, was stepping into a sumptuous touring-car. The negro chauffeur, reaching back, snapped the door shut, and immediately swung the motor-car out into the street.

"Who is that gentleman?" Bob asked of a policeman near by.

"In the auto there? Broussard is his name. Owns half the town."

CHAPTER VI.

THE TELEPHONE CLUE.

DARKNESS was closing down over the city as Bob Stokes made his way to the shipyard. Never one to fail to make the most of his time, especially when matters were pressing, he planned on a certain amount of nightwork.

He needed to familiarize himself with the business details, secure at once a grasp of its elements and features, load his head with facts. And this required a vigorous attack on the office correspondence, reports, and estimates.

After a tour of the yard with the head night watchman to examine the lights which had been strung about the building vessels, and the arrangement of guards, he returned to the office, where he plunged into work.

At about half past ten the telephone rang in the outer office. Going to it, he answered the call.

"Well, that's you, is it?" said a rough voice. "Thought I might catch you there. We're going up the line in the morning and fix those cars of lumber to-morrow night, like you said, so have the rest of that money ready when we get back. And we'll collect it just the same if the cars ain't set out, for that part's up to you."

"What's that?" Stokes demanded.

"I say we collect if they miss dropping those cars. We ain't working for nothing."

"What cars and what money are you talking about?" Bob questioned.

"Say, who's this, anyway? Ain't you—Loosen up there, who are you?"

"This is Stokes's shipyard."

"Well"—a slight pause followed—"wrong number." And the speaker abruptly hung up.

Stokes quickly rang central and inquired who had just called. Presently he was informed the call had been made through a public pay-station. So he was halted short in that direction—but he went back to his desk with the conviction that the man at the other end of the wire had lied. His tone had contained a false note; he had not had the wrong number. That being so, whom had he expected to talk with? Was it a shipment of Stokes's lumber that was concerned? What did the fellow mean by "fix those cars?"—and who was paying money for "fixing" them?

At any rate, some one in the office force was mixed up in the mysterious transaction, and the person could be only the young chap upon whom his suspicions had already centered—Andrews.

Determined to get to the bottom of the thing, he learned from Miss Durand next morning that ten cars of lumber were to be started from the mill at Hanlon, fifty miles in the interior on Freight No. 15 that night.

The office had been so advised by the manager of the lumber company two or three days before, when he had been telephoned regarding the shipment. Mocket or Andrews usually kept after the lumber orders in order to keep the material moving down regularly.

Yes, she stated, there had been some delays in the past, but Mr. Stokes, before he was hurt, had always overcome them and made a point to keep a good supply of lumber ahead. It was necessary to have orders delivered regularly to maintain the reserve.

Bob Stokes thereupon took his hat and went to railroad headquarters, where he interviewed the division superintendent.

Later in the day he went north to Hanlon on a passenger train, accompanied by a man from the superintendent's office. Occupying an hour or two there in discussion of business with the mill manager, he and his companion from Martinsport then proceeded to the railway yard, where Freight No. 15 lay ready to depart, located the ten cars of lumber near the end of the train and climbed aboard the caboose.

"If there's any dirty work done, the train crew will have to be in on it," said the man from headquarters, whose name was Dessler. "Well, we'll know more about it before morning."

The conductor soon entered, a short, grimy-faced individual, his brass badge fastened to his black slouch hat, a lantern on his arm, a lump of tobacco in his cheek.

"Can't ride with us, boys," he said briskly. "This freight doesn't carry passengers."

Dessler handed him an order. The man read it and then looked them over with a trace of suspicion upon his face.

"All right; you can stretch out on these cushions," said he. "You'll find it rough going."

"Oh, we can stand it one night," Dessler answered amicably. "Want to be on hand in town when some cotton you're carrying arrives." There were several cars of cotton in the train, as the speaker had learned. "Get there about five, don't you?"

"If we're on time."

The conductor moved away, turned and gave them a second brief inspection, and then appeared to be satisfied, and went out.

By midnight they had passed through two towns where a few cars were switched off and one or two picked up. At each station Dessler disappeared, rejoining Stokes only as the freight pulled out. It was as they were rumbling forward toward the third stop that a scrap of conversation between the conductor and brakeman reached Bob's ears.

"Damned funny! Something's holding up orders; don't get them till we're ready to beat it."

"Wire trouble, I reckon."

"Hasn't been any storm. Kept us waiting five minutes there at Ennis when we might have been pounding the rails."

"We can make it up at Cartersford; no work there."

"Don't you believe it!" the conductor vociferated. "Got to set ten cars out on the old switch."

The brakeman stared.

"Those cars are chalked 'Martinsport.' Must be a mistake; there hasn't been a car run off on those streaks of rust that I can remember."

"That's where they go. Don't know why, but they do. Billed to Cartersford."

"What's the matter with you: 'Martinsport!'"

"I'm running this train; do you get that? The scribble looks to me like Cartersford, and that's what goes. Let 'em write out their orders plain, if they don't want mistakes."

"Set the cars off; it's your prayer-meeting," was the unconvinced reply. "But your own sense ought to tell you they don't belong back there in the woods, where even a car accountant couldn't find 'em."

"Orders are orders," was the answer.

Stokes and Dessler, smoking and appearing oblivious to everything but the jerking of the caboose, exchanged a nudge.

Cartersford was a railway station and nothing else, a lone depot in the midst of pine woods. Perhaps there were a few shacks back in the trees, but they were not visible when Stokes followed Dessler out upon the ground upon the freight's halting.

The engine was already drawing a string of cars, including Stokes's ten cars of lumber, up the track preparatory to switching work.

The two men went forward to where a dim light showed in the depot building. Dessler made himself known to the agent.

"You have your instructions about releasing orders till I give the word?"

"Yes," said the other.

"When they come in asking for them, stall them off. Wire in immediately also for an order to pick up ten cars here to be taken to Martinsport. These are the numbers. You'll receive the order immediately."

The agent glanced at the list and began to tap his key. Directly the reply sounded. "It's coming." And, seizing a pencil, he began to write. Then he flung over his shoulder: "What's going on? Those cars aren't here?"

"The crew is trying to stick them on an old siding somewhere hereabouts."

"The devil they are! Are they crazy?"

Dessler and Stokes left the building. Off at their left they heard the engine puffing and beheld the faint flash of its head-light through the trees.

"Now, we'll see what the rest of the play is," the former said. "Come along and don't get lost in the dark. I've a flash-light in my pocket, but we better not use it just yet."

Following the track, they discovered the switch and made their way along in the darkness. It was not easy going, for the gloom of the woods surrounded them and the long disused roadbed, at some time laid evidently to a lumber-camp, was grass-grown and rutted. When they had covered a quarter of a mile, the engine's headlight became visible. A whistle sounded.

"They're starting back. We better duck until they're past," Dessler said.

When the returning engine and cars had gone by, they resumed their advance. At a point two hundred yards forward Stokes uttered a low exclamation. A lantern had moved in view, a little way in front.

Cautiously now they moved ahead until voices came to their ears, when they halted.

"Better eat our grub while we're waiting," said one. "Got to give that train time to leave."

"I don't like this so well as I did, Pete. How we goin' to get away if the timber takes fire?"

"Like we come, you fool! In the wagon. The timber won't burn much. Too wet and green."

"Well, I don't know; it's full of turpentine."

"Oh, shut up. Maybe it 'll burn till it reaches a clearing. We'll eat and then break open these doors and pour the oil over the lumber. Soon as we touch her off, we'll head for Martinsport. Thirty miles is all; make it by daylight easy. And then we get the rest of the coin."

"Who's puttin' up for this job, Pete?

You ain't never told me. Come on, spit out his name."

"Keep on guessing, for I'm not going to tell you."

"You ain't no real pal or you'd unload his name."

"Stow that. You're gettin' your share of the easy money; that's enough. And there's to be quite a lot more of it when this job is done."

"There won't be any more for me, for I'm going to blow north."

"Then you're a fool."

"If you're a pal and want me to stay along, hand me out this fellow's name. I'm going to know as much as you do or we split."

The discussion which had taken on an acrimonious edge promised a quarrel. The pair during their wait in the woods had been helping themselves to liquor, and the second man's curiosity in consequence had settled into a stubborn insistence, interlarded as had been all their talk with oaths and curses.

Stokes, on his part, was as eager to learn the men's employer as was the uninformed scoundrel.

"Well, don't make such a holler," Pete said. "I'm holdin' nothing out on you. We've been pals a long time, Jack, and we won't quit on account of this feller's name. His name is Smith."

"Is that straight, Pete? Smith ain't no name; it's just a label. Too many Smiths for that."

"He says his name is Smith, and I asked no questions. His money is what talks, with me."

Stokes's keen anticipation evaporated in disappointment. He had hoped to learn to a certainty the man instigating the subtle attacks upon his company. If Smith were really the cognomen of the chief plotter, then he was a stranger. But if, as he guessed, it were but an alibi, one was none the wiser.

The two disreputables, still talking, went with their lantern to a spot on one side of the track, where, sitting upon the ground, they produced a bottle, had a drink each, and opened a bundle of food.

"Do you recognize by voice one of those fellows as the man who called your office by telephone?" Dessler asked, turning to Stokes.

"That man named Pete."

"You'll run down the traitor in your employ, of course. That is up to you. Meanwhile we'll grab these chaps. Steal up on them quietly till we're near enough to cover them with our guns. This isn't only your game, remember, but the railroad's as well; they plan to destroy our cars along with your lumber. It will be the pen for them!"

Using stealth in their advance toward the pair of criminals, Stokes and Dessler proceeded until from a near-by bush they had a clear view of Pete and Jack and again could hear their rough talk.

Close at hand and shining dully in the lantern's light were three square tin ten-gallon cans of oil, with which the men proposed to spray the cars and fire them. Where were tied the horses and wagon in which the hirelings had come, the observers could only guess, for they were not visible; no doubt, somewhere not far off in the darkness.

Pete and Jack ate and conversed and grunted and occasionally washed their throats with a draft of whisky.

"Well, that train hasn't gone yet," the latter was saying.

"They'll be pullin' along by the time we're done eatin'," the other answered. "Unloadin' some stuff, maybe."

"Wonder how much the crew got for their end of this job."

"Don't know and don't care. We'll get what's comin' to us; that's all I'm interested in, bo." A wave of a dirty hand emphasized his utter indifference to extraneous matters.

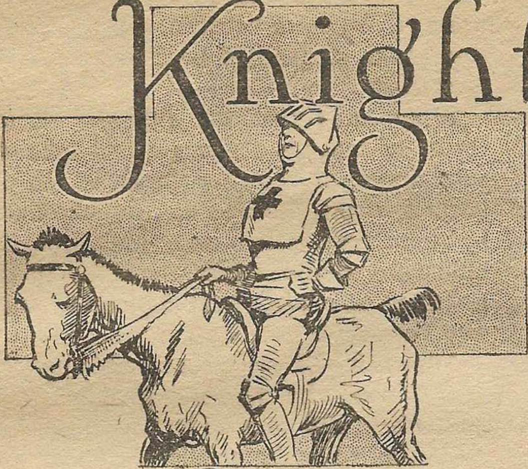
At this instant Dessler touched Stokes's arm warningly. The two listeners thereupon noiselessly stepped round their bush and out upon the seated men.

"Take a look at this and see how it interests you," Dessler said to the speaker.

With a start Pete jerked his face about toward the voice. What he saw appeared to interest him considerably. It was the muzzle of a revolver leveled at his eyes.

(To Be Continued.)

Knighted by the Red Cross



by Richard Barry

JAMES JAMESON JONES (born the year of Jameson's raid and therefore ripe for military duty although so far he had evaded it), seated himself grouchily on the park bench one bright October morning just before noon, and proceeded to take an inventory of his circumstances and prospects.

As an adventurer in the marts of life he presented to himself certain difficulties.

The state of the shrubbery told him the first frost was already here. Previously at this time of year he had always been on his way to California, but this season he had been unavoidably detained on Blackwell's Island. Certain of his late acquaintances there had gibed him for the unprofessional slip which had cost him six months in April. What sort of a hobo was he who would go against the coppers in the spring?

His only answer was to thrust his tongue in his cheek and wink his eye. Had not war been declared a week before he made this slip? And had he not avoided, so far at least, any embarrassing questions, any pointed remarks about his apparent age and palpable physical fitness?

His professional opinion, which, however, he kept carefully to himself, was that soldiering is a trade for the mediocre and the stupid, and that it holds no attraction for one whose wits are sharp enough to keep him out of work and in the hands of the police only when their alliance is necessary to defeat the arch enemy, labor.

Jim Jam, if we may refer to him familiarly as did his pals in the workhouse, was a likable fellow. To do him justice he was an extremely likable fellow. No one less personable could have spent a summer living on Connecticut back-door pies, for Connecticut is notoriously the hardest State in the Union in which a gentleman of the restless hike may subsist.

One of Jim Jam's specialties was a thorough acquaintance with the affairs of the day. He could always pay a farmer's wife for a meal with a half-hour talk on current events, which was a much pleasanter exchange than splitting wood or hoeing weeds.

As he sat there in the brisk October morning his mind was chiefly concerned with two problems. First, where he could get a newspaper and bring his information down to date. Second, how he could manage to beat his way three thousand miles when the nights were too cold to cling to the brake beams and too many vigilant trainmen were about in the daytime.

An answer to his first question appeared promptly, for a middle-aged man with a newspaper in his hand sat beside him. Jim Jam, accustomed to estimate newspaper readers with accurate quickness, hoped this might be a bachelor, and therefore likely to leave his paper behind when he had finished with it. Married men, schooled in economy, usually took them home.

Yes, this was a bachelor. The dandruff lay thick on his collar; there was a button off his coat, yet he appeared prosperous and contented.

Jim Jam waited patiently while the other read the editorial page, a palpable confession that he was nearly through, and hardly noticed that a third man had seated himself on the opposite end of the bench.

True to form the middle man rose presently, dropped his paper on the seat he had vacated, and ambled on. However, with the characteristic heedlessness of the bachelor, he dropped it on the side away from Jim Jam, and when that news-hungry worthy reached for his crumb at the journalistic table it was all but gone; the third man was about to take it.

Infuriated at this confiscation of what he considered his rightful inheritance, Jim Jam grabbed at the paper shortly after the other's hand had closed on it.

Ensued a trifling struggle, at the end of which Jim Jam settled himself on his end of the bench with one sheet of the paper, while the other retired behind another sheet a few feet away. In short and contemptuous appraisal of his antagonist Jim Jam observed that he was well-dressed, suavely mannered, and not in the least ruffled by the little contretemps; indeed raillery shone from his eye as though the contest were only sport to him.

Jim Jam heartily despised him. Why should an amateur encroach on the precinct of a professional? Was it likely that any fellow as well-dressed as he had actual need of a discarded newspaper; could it be bread and meat and drink to him? Palpably not, and if not what business had he wrestling the staff of life from a poor tramp not six hours out of jail? A robber like that would take the peanuts from the park squirrels, or snitch cake crumbs from the sparrows.

The stranger, conscious of this enmity, was enjoying it, and was better pleased with his measure of Mr. Jones.

Jim Jam was half consoled by discovering that his share of the booty included the front page. He settled himself to enjoy it.

First off there was a story of millions—$61,837,345.50, to be exact. That was the sum which so far had been raised by the Red Cross.

It appeared that the city was in the throes of making a gigantic and fabulous subscription: cohorts for the attack on the pockets of the patriotic and the charitable had been marshaled in every walk, from the billionaire who captained the array to the newsboys who passed tin cups at the subway entrances.

Advertising of every conceivable description, backed by every financial, social, journalistic, and political influence, had succeeded in whipping public sentiment into a froth of glittering enthusiasm whose substantial return was measured by the millions mentioned, on top of which it was proposed to pile many millions more.

This pleased Jim Jam strangely. The mere talk about so much money exhilarated him. He enjoyed basking in the thought of millions, in the look of the words in print, and he began speculating on what he would do with a million dollars.

He could buy a ticket to California and thus solve the problem of brake beams, cold nights, and offensive trainmen. Beyond that he could imagine nothing desirable, for there is a well recognized limit to the mundane efficiency of mere money. Once in California, of course, he could sleep in the open, in the alfalfa fields, or under the orange trees.

Even as his mind dwelt on this pleasing prospect his eye caught an alarming item in another column. There it was proposed to register all the unlisted men without homes who frequented the parks and the lodging houses. Those of military age were to be turned over to the army; the others were to be placed at work for the municipality, and forcibly detained for all winter service.

This gave Jim Jam a severe shock. The times were bad, beyond doubt. Indeed this might prove to be a most serious matter. It required prompt and decisive action. He dropped the paper, rose to his feet, hitched up his belt and looked about.

" Hold on there, my man. Sit down. I want to talk with you."

A tremor, as of guilty fear, passed over Jim Jam. Then he realized that his late antagonist was addressing him, and looked down sneeringly.

No scavenger of discarded newspapers could have any menace for him. He did not deign to answer, though he looked upon a friendly smile.

" Come; do you want a job?"

Ordinarily Jim Jam would have given this proposition the answer it deserved and would have passed on without a word. But, as has been noted, the times were bad; it was no moment for any prudent man to ignore any chance to escape that " all winter " prospect. Jim Jam sat and contemplated his would-be deliverer with guarded care.

" Something to earn the rest of that paper, I suppose," parried Jim Jam.

" Pardon me." The genial fellow handed him the valued sheet.

Jim Jam seized it and glowered at him.

" What kind of a job?"

" Carrying a banner."

" Pee-rade?"

" No. Alone. It's a sort of advertisement."

" Not on your life," exclaimed Jim Jam with disgust. " I'm no sandwich man."

He catapulted himself to the far end of the bench where he proceeded to devour the inside of the rescued paper.

The stranger moved nearer.

" You don't have to walk," he said. " There's a horse to ride."

Jim Jam looked up warily.

" How much is there in it?" he asked.

" Two dollars a day."

Jim Jam dropped his paper. Here was something to consider carefully.

Despite his vehement expression of caste superiority he might have qualified as an expert in the sandwiching line, and he had never heard of two dollars a day for work like that. As for riding a horse—that was mythical; it must be a joke.

He strove to conceal his eagerness, and, without daring to look at the stranger, asked with an affectation of boredom: " A horse, did you say?"

" Yes. You would only have to ride him around the rest of the day, and it's noon now. I'll pay you two dollars. Do you think you can ride a horse?"

" I was born on a farm, mister. Lead me to it."

They passed quickly out of the park together and down into the Fifties to an old stable where the stranger was welcomed by a seeming confederate in this strange plot.

A horse was produced, a chestnut nag which had seen better days, but which was still capable of bearing a man for a few hours. Jim Jam examined the steed suspiciously, and then accepted it with a grunt, though he had a final stipulation, which he expressed succinctly in the query, " Do I get any eats?"

The stranger led him around the corner and planted him before an oilcloth table in a tiny restaurant, ordering a steak, two boiled potatoes, a huge chunk of pie, and a pint bowl of coffee.

After this bounteous repast Jim Jam returned to the stable. There they had the " banner " ready to hang over his neck. In front was a yard square piece of cloth, on which was painted a cross in bright red, and in the rear was a similar piece of cloth on which appeared the following proclamation:

RED CROSS CORN PLASTERS

Guaranteed to Cure or Money Refunded

TRY ONE

The two then proceeded to clothe Jim Jam appropriately for his new employment. They produced an old suit of armor which had been scrubbed until it shone, and this they fitted on him.

Now it appeared why the stranger who had met him in the park had chosen Jim Jam; he was of the medium height and of the requisite slenderness to fit the armor. Even as it was the creaking joints of the old plate metal pinched his thighs and crushed in suffocatingly on his chest. Jim Jam endured it stoically and as a crowning glory they placed on his head a shining helmet with a flat top which arched down over his neck with gallant precision.

When he was fully arrayed and stood

forth resplendent, the two began a debate as to how they would lift him into the saddle. Jim Jam forestalled the argument by seizing the horns and vaulting in easily. The old nag, frightened, cantered out and down the street, but Jim Jam soon reined him in and came back, prancing, erect, precise as a circus rider.

"Bully! You ride like a knight!" laughed the stranger.

"Never was a night rider. Those guys come from across the river, down into Kaintucky. I'm from Ohio," protested Jim Jam.

The two laughed at the far-fetched pun, but were unable to tell whether or not Jim Jam meant it. Just before he started out they slipped the banner over his head, so that the red cross was in front and the corn-plaster injunction behind. Then they slapped the nag and told Jim Jam to go to it. He was to ride up and down Fifth Avenue for three hours.

As he turned the corner into the avenue Jim Jam experienced the supreme moment of his life. The rigidity and the weight of the armor compelled him to assume a martial pose, but the spirit within him responded to a nobler appeal. It was the élan of *the* avenue.

Being a specialist in country back doors and having confined himself previously to the active demands of his own calling, Jim Jam had never before seen this arch aristocrat of boulevards, save in crossing, for Fifth Avenue has no back doors.

He was not a panhandler and was prejudiced against soiling his vision with the glut of cities, favoring the green fields, as became a country boy. Hence the park and the upper portion of the city chiefly appealed to him. Therefore he now confronted Fifth Avenue practically for the first time, clothed in shining armor, bearing a banner with a sacred design, mounted, elate, and was lifted suddenly on the wings, as it were, of an emotional appeal that swept him high into ecstasy.

No high commissioner from lands across the sea, no warrior destined for the fields of battle, no mayor, no Governor, no President riding the wave of popular favor ever passed down the avenue with greater aplomb or with a securer sense of conquest than did Jim Jam with his plea for Red Cross Corn-Plasters.

The cañon of stone and brick was decked in holiday array for him! For him the streets were lined with recreant throngs, vulgar serfs and retainers permitted to view his proud eminence. For him the great cathedral reared its slim spires austerely into the vault of blue. For him the blue-coated regulators of the traffic held back, diverted, swayed and cleared the swollen river of machines and carriages, clearing for him a path of broad safety that he might ride on, regnant and sedate. Magnificent in mien, imperial in poise he swept along.

If clothes make the man, then cut steel and shining helmet and a horse to bear it all transformed James Jameson Jones, peripatetic visionary, into a mounted knight of the Red Cross, *sans peur et sans reproche.* For him the snickers were envious gibes, the laughs a confused murmur of rippling wonder, the curious glances a tribute of deep esteem.

There were slight circumstances which might possibly have added to his exaltation.

If only the father who had whipped him for loafing in the hayfield and from whose run-down farm he had escaped in the dead of night could see him now! Or the sister who had doused him with a pail of water for plowing up her pansy bed! Or the fellows at the crossroads school who had so often seen him on the high stool beside the teacher's desk wearing the dunce's cap.

A dunce's cap! What prelude to this shining helmet so admirably designed to turn every arrow of outrageous fortune!

To the sociological expert who tickets and pigeonholes each specimen of erring humanity, assorting and classifying all remnants of the genus homo, Jim Jam would have presented a familiar phenomenon.

"Subnormal" they would have called him in the argot of the settlement house, and would have explained to you how men of his ilk for some reason, usually hereditary taint, never progress mentally beyond the growth of a twelve-year-old boy: how their minds retain always the quickness, the slyness, the irresponsibility and the imaginative eagerness of youth without ever attaining the morality of experience or the perspective of maturity.

The traffic policeman at the corner of Forty-Second Street expressed his opinion more quickly.

"Pipe the mounted sandwicher!" he called to his assistant who was shoveling the cross-town cars hastily through a lane of banked automobiles. A broad grin relieved the furrowed face of authority as he magisterially held up the pedestrian flood, making way mockingly for the bannered knight, who acknowledged the service with a sovereign's nod. Victory—a cop subservient!

A bit further down on the triumphal march a virtuous citizen caught sight of the anachronistic Jim Jam and his perverted device. He was the sort who is always prepared to defend his city by a ballot deposited at the behest of a political party, or to crucify sedition with a letter to the newspapers. Forthwith he marched himself indignantly to an office near by from which was flung the real Red Cross banner and excitedly denounced the impostor.

An under secretary was haled impulsively to the nearest window, whence was pointed out the irreverent offender. From the virtuous citizen the functionary concealed a covert smile, and promised to have the affair investigated. He agreed that something must be done, and promised to see to it immediately. Whereupon the virtuous citizen departed, with righteous satisfaction, and the under-secretary, with customary subsecretarial zeal, forgot the matter.

Even at that instant and scarcely a block away Jim Jam was in difficulty. For several blocks he had noticed that his war steed had been limping. Now the poor nag stumbled and almost fell.

Jim Jam was obliged to dismount and investigate. The moment he did so the horse held up his fore foot, with all but human intelligence, and exhibited in the soft fork an imbedded nail. Jim Jam seized it to pull it out, but it was in too far and would not yield.

Apparently he would have to get closer to this job, which his farm training told him would not be difficult if he could get the proper purchase for the extraction. He edged the animal close to the curb, out of the stream of vehicles, but the banner was in his way. As he walked it bothered the horse and when he leaned over he stepped on it. So he removed it and laid it across the saddle. Thus the inscription was hid, and only the red cross showed to the passer-by.

Petting the horse on his neck and receiving a grateful whinny in response, Jim Jam backed up to the injured foot which he took between the legs. But, as he leaned over the helmet fell off and clattered on the street. Jim Jam dropped the foot and reached for the precious helmet, his badge of glory, his oriflamme of victory.

Here was another dilemma. He could not wear the helmet and pick the nail out of the horse's hoof, and if he placed it on the street the horse might step on it, or, if set too far away for that, some one might steal it or run over it. The only thing left to do was to place it on the curb, close at hand.

Because of its arched neck and rounded forepiece its not rolling off would be insured in only one way. That was to set it on its top, with its interior yawning up, like a bssket asking for alms. Thus Jim Jam left it and returned to his veterinarian first aid.

After a spirited tug or two the nail yielded, and Jim Jam stood upright happily while the horse rubbed a nose affectionately on his shoulder.

Meanwhile a crowd had gathered. If a crowd can be collected on the streets of New York by a man with a puppy for sale, surely a knight in shining armor, bearing the insignia of war's chief charity, deserves attention in mid-afternoon on Fifth Avenue and within sight of the headquarters of the National Red Cross.

Jim Jam received all the homage that even he felt he deserved. It rather annoyed him, and he stooped to pick up his helmet when he was startled to have a coin shoot past his face and drop with a resounding ring into the top of the shining metal, where it clanged with a merry tinkle that spoke well for the quality of the armor. Then another and another flashed from willing fingers in the crowd and Jim Jam, abashed, bewildered, recovered his poise in the nick of time, and stood at attention.

" I know, father, you have given a lot," said a comely girl to her elderly escort, " but it's the Red Cross, and such an oddly poetic way to solicit. Do give the man something."

Dimes, quarters, fifty-cent-pieces clattered into the capacious metal maw. Then a woman in early furs dropped a paper bill and it floated softly down on the little pile of coins. Another followed. More coins, Another bill.

Jim Jam reacted to the phenomenon like a veteran. Instantly the poise and certainty, the martial glory, and the elated superiority which had distinguished his progress down the avenue clothed him as in an aureole.

He opened his mouth to speak, but thought better of it. The Red Cross! The newspaper headlines came back to him. Millions—eh? Then this was his share. Why speak when hundreds of newspapers, thousands of orators, millions of willing men and women, countless posters and banners were speaking for him?

Was it Emerson who called attention to the fact that the axman does not strike his weapon into the tree above his head but into the wood at his feet thus summoning to his aid all the forces of gravity?

In similar fashion, at that moment, Jim Jam was leagued in the tough, vast fabric of all the patriotic and philanthropic forces of the republic. Through a trifling accident he had embarked on the Amazon of plenty.

Was it for him to accelerate or to retard that mighty flow? Wiser men than he would have hesitated and Jim Jam, now dowered with knightly modesty, stood politely but vigilantly silent.

However, he did not fail to keep a cautious eye roving occasionally up and down the avenue, though needlessly. He was safe. Many a successful breaker of the law might have told him that the easiest place to work such tricks is in the heart of the city, under the nose of the police and with brazen effrontery.

After a few minutes Jim Jam became nervous, especially when the coins ceased to fall and the throng increased. Fearing the advent of a policeman he bowed, with solemnity and perfect assurance, to the casual crowd, swept the collection into his rear pocket, donned the helmet, gathered the banner to his breast as he deftly concealed the lettering, mounted the horse, and was off.

He was shrewd enough to pass back up the avenue in the direction of the Red Cross headquarters, so that those who observed him for a moment might have thought he was going to deliver his booty.

At the second corner he turned, gained a side street and once there made all speed by devious ways toward the stable from which he started.

Now the armor bit his thighs and pinched his legs, hurt his chest and bruised his arms, and the helmet pressed wofully on his skull. All his grandeur had departed and in its place was the furtive, restless manner of one who prayed for nightfall and a lonely far road.

As he turned the last corner near the stable, he unfurled the banner, rehung it over his neck, and rode in with it flying. Where he had leaped on the horse without assistance he needed help now to get down, and he could hardly wait for them to take off the armor.

So impatient was he to get away that the stranger who had first met him in the park had to follow him to the door with the two dollars which had been agreed upon as his wage.

Jim Jam took it with mumbled thanks and slunk off into the gathering dusk.

" He started out like a trooper, but the iron killed him," remarked one of the patent-medicine men to the other.

Just before the office of a transcontinental railroad a dozen blocks away closed for the night, one of the clerks was timidly approached by a seedy-looking individual who asked about second-class fares to California. He responded silently by passing out some printed circulars, and promptly shooed the shiftless one out so that he could lock up.

Jim Jam hastened around the corner into an alley where, under a dim light, he tried to discover in the maze of figures and schedules, when he could start and what it would cost to get there. Satisfied at last that he was alone, and safe, he began to breathe more freely.

He had his hand tightly over his rear pocket, not daring as yet to count his gains, or even to look at them.

This he was about to do when a hand seized his and he recoiled precipitately, confronted by visions of the police. But it was only a woman who fell against him.

Doubtless a drunk, he concluded, and cast her off. She collapsed to the pavement with a groan.

He bent over her. To his surprise he could not smell liquor on her breath, and he saw lovely features distorted with pain. He asked her if she was hurt. The reply was so low that he had to bend very close and she whispered in his ear.

Jim Jam started as if he had been shot.

Plainly the thing to do was to get some assistance. Very likely he should have called a policeman, but at that moment Jim Jam suffered from a delicate restraint in considering officers of the law in any capacity.

He ran to the end of the alley and looked out. A cab was passing, one of those old sea-going hacks which have all but disappeared, but which are so commodious and so comfortable and which possess depths for the convenient hiding of lovers—or others who do not crave the glare of passing street lamps.

Jim Jam hailed the cab and called to the driver to assist him. They managed to get the woman into the rear seat where they stretched her out comfortably.

" Where to, guv'nor?" asked the aged cabby respectfully.

The deference of the tone—even so slight a thing as that—transformed Jim Jam in a second. Again he was the master of ceremonies, the lord of fate, the arbiter of destiny.

" To the maternity hospital," he said.

The night watch had just come on as the old wabbly cab drew up before the majestic gates of the hospital. Jim Jam leaped out, rushed in and uttered a few hurried words.

Presently a stretcher appeared with two stalwart attendants. The woman was lifted in tenderly and was taken quickly to the receiving room just off from the entrance. There an attendant loosened her clothes and as he did so a postcard fell out. It bore a French mark, and a few words.

" Hello," said the house surgeon, as he looked from it to the nurse in attendance, " this is the wife of one of the infantry boys on the other side.

" Friend of the family, I suppose?" he asked, turning to Jim Jam.

Jim Jam nodded his head.

" Shall we take her to a private ward, or the public?"

Jim Jam revealed his perplexity in a glance and the surgeon explained the difference: the free rough charity of the one of contrast with the privacy and comfort of the other.

The late wearer of armor gulped and asked, fearsomely, how much the private ward would cost, while his hand slipped guardedly to his rear pocket. The surgeon told him.

Jim Jam went deliberately to a table in the hall and under an arc-light counted, for the first time, the gains of the afternoon. The total amounted to the sum the surgeon had named, to a penny. He picked up the coins with both hands, the bills wadded in with the lesser values, and placed the pile in the surgeon's palm.

" A private ward," he said.

Jim Jam walked slowly, it might even be said forlornly, to the door. Then a happy thought struck him. A smile lit up his amiable countenance and he came back; reached into his inner pocket and brought forth one of the bills he had been paid for his work of the afternoon.

" When the kid comes," he said, giving the dollar to the surgeon, " buy it some posies—a red cross of geraniums with white daisies around."

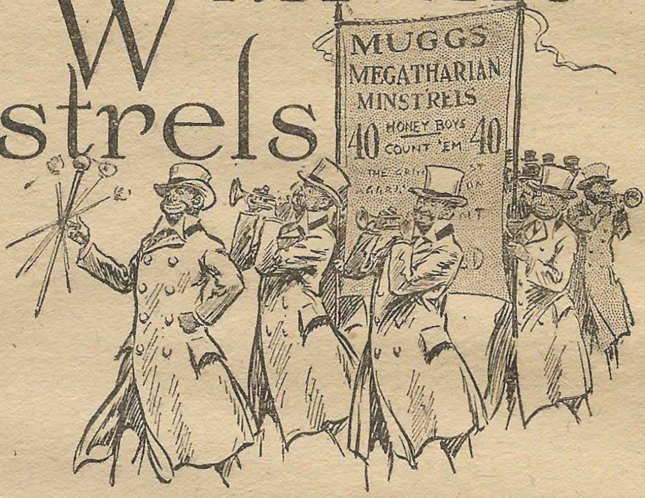
As Jim Jam passed from the warm hospital into the cold night the furtive slouch slipped from him, his fear disappeared.

Down Fifth Avenue's impressive length he marched, from above the Cathedral to below the Library, and as he passed under the far flung banner of the Red Cross, he bowed for an instant. Then his head raised proudly, his eyes flashed, and his hand rose in military salute.

Out With the Minstrels

by

Malcolm Douglas



(COMPLETE IN THIS ISSUE.)

CHAPTER I.

THE MINSTRELS COME TO SQUANTUM.

MUGGS'S Megatharian Minstrels—Forty Honey Boys, Count 'Em, Forty—were to play Squantum on the sixth.

In spite of the grandiloquent claims of the management the company was a cheap one, and it appeared in what are known to the profession as " tank towns "—that is, the small one-night stands which are carefully avoided by big, expensive theatrical organizations.

Squantum was fairly well billed, thanks to the energetic efforts of the advance agent, but here again the inferiority of Muggs's Megatharian Minstrels was apparent to the experienced eye.

The lithographs in the store-windows showed the conventional semicircle of performers or exaggerated heads of black-faced comedians, and were what is termed " stock paper," which every lithograph concern keeps on hand to meet the requirements of fly-by-night minstrel companies. The colors were cheap, as was the paper, and the work was poorly executed.

The minstrels came in on the 9.30 from Danvers, where they had played the night before. The party railroad ticket had called for twenty, but twenty-two got off at the Squantum station, the extra two having eluded the vigilance of the conductor and ridden free.

Two drops, a number of flats, and a score of trunks were dumped off the baggage-car. O'Brien, the local transfer man, was on hand to receive them, and he had an open wagon backed up at the platform. With him was his assistant, young Patsy McGuire.

The minstrels with their grips were starting off for the American House, where the advance agent had made arrangements to quarter them at the rate of $1.25 a day. Young Patsy looked at them admiringly.

" Gee! " he said. " I'd like to go out with the boys."

" You'd better stick to the horses in the stable," said O'Brien gruffly, " an' get such fool notions out of your head."

" It must be great, though, seein' all the country," said Patsy, not discouraged by the other's remark.

" It's better to be sure o' grabbin' three square meals a day," said O'Brien.

" What's the matter with the meals at the American House?" asked Patsy.

The response O'Brien was about to make

was interrupted by a burly, thick-set man who rushed up, and interjected:

"Say, you're the transfer man, ain't you? I'm Jones, the carpenter with the company. Get a move on, an' hustle all that stuff up to the op'ra-house."

Patsy assisted O'Brien in loading the equipment on the wagon, and they eventually moved off in the direction of Tucker's Opera-House, Jones riding on one of the trunks.

At the opera-house the drops and flats were placed on the stage, and the trunks were deposited as Jones directed in the various dressing-rooms.

"I'm workin' short-handed," he explained. "The property-man blew at the last stand."

In a short time the minstrels, all in pearl-colored overcoats with high silk hats to match, had formed outside the opera-house, ready for the parade. The band, with brass instruments headed them, and Muggs in exchange for passes for the night's performance was effecting hasty arrangements with boys to carry banners and throw out handbills on the prospective line of march.

A number of loafers watched the preparations, and one of them drawled:

"They advertise forty, an' I can only count nineteen. I guess it's purty punk."

Led by Muggs, with the brass band blaring blatantly, "There'll Be a Hot Time in the Old Town To-Night," the organization started for a parade of the principal streets.

O'Brien, who had got his load off, looked around for Patsy, who was nowhere in sight.

"Cuss him!" he said as he mounted the seat. "He's gone trapesin' after them nigger hamfatters when he oughter be washin' wagons an' curryin' hosses."

O'Brien was right. Patsy was following the minstrel parade.

Patsy noted with envy the pearl-colored overcoats and high silk hats, and, as their wearers stepped out jauntily and swung their light canes to the enlivening strains of brass, they did not seem to have a care or a trouble.

Little did Patsy dream that to a man they longed to be holding up the bar of the American House or playing penny-ante in its sparsely furnished rooms.

Down Main Street, stopping to play in the public square; up Park, then into Market, and divers other thoroughfares, passed the procession, while Patsy trailed along with it.

The face of Muggs glowered, for the first thing he had done on arriving in town was to hasten to Smith's drug-store, where he had ascertained that the advance sale for the night's performance totalled just four dollars and seventy-five cents. This, of course, presaged a poor house.

Back to Tucker's Opera-House the parade doubled, and then broke ranks. The minstrels shed their overcoats and hats, and the band put away their instruments.

Patsy knew the house carpenter, Green, and he ventured upon the stage without the fear of a rebuke.

Green was assisting the company's man Jones to set the stage for the first part.

Muggs and the band leader strolled in and gave things a casual inspection. The moment Patsy saw them he began to sing the chorus of a popular song, "Girl o' Mine."

"Girl o' mine, girl o' mine,
  How you'd grieve me
  If you'd leave me,
Girl o' mine.
When my heart calls out you hear me,
And you comfort and you cheer me;
Oh, I want you always near me,
  Girl o' mine, girl o' mine!"

Patsy's tenor voice, though untrained, still had a remarkable quality, and Muggs and the band leader listened as though spellbound.

"Say, young feller, you've got some pipes!" was Muggs's admiring comment. "Have you ever been out with a show?"

"No, but I'd like to," said Patsy.

"Why, he took a high C," said the band leader, who called himself Signor Novello. "Just run over the scales with me."

He seated himself at an upright piano that stood in one of the wings and struck a chord. Patsy sounded a note and followed him up, and still up. Novello wheeled around on the stool, and said to Muggs, with great surprise:

"He's got a range of three and a half octaves. He finished with a high E."

"Why are you wastin' your time in this jay town?" asked Muggs of Patsy. "You're drivin' a milk wagon, or something like that, ain't you?"

"No, I'm workin' in a livery stable," said Patsy.

"Why ain't you out with some show?"

"I ain't never had a chance."

"Well, I'll give you one. Can you double in brass?"

Patsy looked confused.

"I don't know what you mean," he said.

"I mean play some brass instrument."

"No."

"I could soon get him up on the cornet," said Signor Novello.

"Well, if you'll help Jones, the stage carpenter, and work props." said Muggs, "I'll give you ten a week an' your hotels an' railroads."

"What do you mean by hotels an' railroads," asked the dumfounded Patsy.

"Why, I'll pay your hotel bills an' railroad fares," explained Muggs. "You can sing in the first part an' break in fur the olio. What do you say, young feller?"

"You're not stringin' me, are you?" said the dumfounded Patsy.

"Stringin' you, no!" said Muggs. "I'm givin' ye a chance to go out with the Megatharians. Do ye wanner go?"

"You betcher life!" cried overjoyed Patsy.

Just then O'Brien, his boss, stalked out on the stage. There was work for Patsy to do at the stable, and he was infuriated.

"What are ye loafin' here fur?" he angrily demanded. "If ye don't get busy on the job I'll fire ye!"

"No, ye won't, either," said Patsy, "fur I've resigned. I'm goin' out with the minstrels!"

CHAPTER II.

PATSY'S FIRST PROFESSIONAL APPEARANCE.

IN his decision to join Muggs's Megatharian Minstrels, Patsy McGuire was not hampered by the thought of any parental objection to such a plan. To the best of his knowledge he did not have a relative in the world.

"This is what I git fur takin' you from the poor-farm," cried O'Brien, glaring at him. "I oughter let you starved there."

"You ain't got no kicks comin', O'Brien," said Patsy indifferently. "You've worked me like a dog, an' all I've got from you's my keep. I'm of age, an' my own boss now."

"That's what makes you so fresh," growled O'Brien. "I was meanin' to give you wages. Just you go out with the minstrels an' see what happens to ye. You'll be countin' ties on the railroad-track, an' beggin' me to let you sleep with the hosses."

"Say," Muggs broke in with considerable resentment, "I'd have ye know this is a responsible organization. Salaries are just as sure with me as with the government."

O'Brien gave a contemptuous laugh, and without another word walked off. Muggs turned to Patsy.

"Is it true that he took ye from the poor-farm?" he asked.

"Yes," said Patsy. "His cousin, McGuire, is the overseer, an' that's how I got my name."

"Have ye any relatives?"

"None I know of," said Patsy.

"How did you get to the poor-farm?"

"I was born there."

"Is that so?" said Muggs, with interest. "Yer mother, I s'pose, was one o' the inmates."

"No, she came there," said Patsy. "She must 'a' been in a lot of trouble, poor mother, but what it was no one knew. She died when I was born."

"Ah," said Signor Novello, with sympathy, "she was an unfortunate!"

"In one way she was," said Patsy. "She must 'a' been in pretty hard luck. But, mister, she was married all right. Everything was as straight as a string. I've got her marriage certificate an' weddin' ring to prove it."

He held up his left hand as he spoke, and on the little finger was a gold ring of quaint design.

"On the inside," he explained, "it says 'From John to Mary.'"

"It's an odd ring," said Muggs, after an inspection. "I never saw anything like it. Do you know about yar father?"

"No," said Patsy. "His name's on the certificate, of course. I always keep it in my pocket, so if any one gits castin' slurs I kin show it to 'em. But they was married in New York, an' York's a pretty big place. I ain't never tried to find out anything about him. I don't s'pose it would be any good."

"Why don't you take his name instead of McGuire?"

"Why, it's this way, mister," said Patsy. "The name of a man who'd desert a woman when she most needs him ain't worth takin'. McGuire at the poor-farm ain't a bad sort, an' while I was there I was always sorter looked on as his boy. That's why I'm called McGuire."

"You'll have to can it now you're goin' in the perfession," said Muggs decidedly. "There ain't any romance in the name McGuire. It 'd be all right if you was goin' starrin' in an Irish drama, an' wanted to catch the Micks, but it ain't highfalutin' enough by a long shot fur the minstrel bus'ness. From now on you'd better call yourself Harold Evermond."

"It sounds kind o' sissy to me," said Patsy, "but anything goes."

"That gives me an idea," said Muggs, addressing Signor Novello. "The house is goin' to be rotten to-night. I wonder if we couldn't git Harold ready for the first part an' try to boost up things a bit."

"I know all the words o' the song, 'Girl o' Mine,' by heart," spoke up Patsy.

"I've got the orchestration in my music trunk," said Signor Novello to Muggs. "I'll rehearse him, if you like."

"Good!" cried Muggs. "We'll let Harold wear those hand-me-down dress togs I got at Guttenburg's. Say," he added, turning to Patsy, "are ye a big local favorite?"

"I can't say about bein' a favorite," replied Patsy, "but all know me."

"Take him in hand, Novello," instructed Muggs enthusiastically, "an' I'll play him up to beat the band. I'll hustle to a printin' office an' have 'em rush off a couple o' thousand dodgers. Where's the best place to have 'em done, young feller?"

"At the Squantum *Weekly Star*," said Patsy promptly.

At the *Star* establishment Muggs entered into negotiations with the foreman, who, with a dirty ink-smudged apron tucked up under his stubby chin, scratched a shock of hair that should have been harvested a month before, and remarked dubiously:

"The price is two dollars a thousand, but I dunno as I kin git 'em out in two hours."

"Then I'll go somewhere else," said Muggs.

"Oh, I guess I kin do 'em all right," said the foreman. "Where's the copy?"

Muggs sat down at a rough, wooden table, and seizing some scratch paper began to write with a pencil. As he continued in his literary effort the foreman grew more and more nervous and at last broke forth:

"Say, if I'd 'a' knowed ye wanted all that it 'd have cost ye a dollar more. That's an awful lot o' composition."

Muggs held up the product of his brain, and ran his eye over it with much pride:

EXTRA! EXTRA!!

TO-NIGHT
AT TUCKER'S OPERA-HOUSE!
MUGGS'S MEGATHARIAN
MINSTRELS!

40—COUNT 'EM—40

ADDED FEATURE
MR. PATSY McGUIRE
SQUANTUM'S WONDERFUL TENOR!
Hear Him Sing the World-Famous Ballad,

"GIRL O' MINE"!

Mr. McGuire Takes to the High C's Like a
German Submarine, and Out-Carusos Caruso!

POPULAR PRICES, 25-50-75 CTS.!

"That 'll catch 'em all right," he said with considerable pride.

"Ye got too much matter on it," grumbled the foreman.

Muggs paid no attention to the criticism, and consulted his watch.

"Twelve o'clock!" he said. "I guess I'd better hike back to the American an' feed my face."

At the American House he saw Signor Novello, who beamed with satisfaction.

"Some pipes that kid's got," the band leader announced. "Why, he'll be a reg'lar knockout. His voice is a corker. If it was only trained he could go in grand op'ra."

Patsy in the mean time was making a graceful exit from the domicile of the O'Briens. This was accomplished without any difficulty, for Mrs. O'Brien entertained a strong dislike of him because of his abnormal appetite.

He gathered his few belongings together in a dilapidated grip, and bade that estimable lady a not particularly affectionate good-by, being utterly impervious to all her sarcastic remarks.

The only tiny cloud upon his horizon of happiness came from the fact that his arrangement with Muggs had not been consummated in time to allow him to don a pearl-colored overcoat and high silk hat and parade Squantum's principal streets to the envy of all his fellows.

The *Star's* foreman had the handbills ready as agreed, and little boys, in consideration of promises that they should see the show for nothing, scattered them far and wide, but principally up the alleys.

They put them in the groceries, meat-stores, and bakeshops, and soon the whole town was agog over the surprising piece of information they conveyed.

Patsy aided materially by circulating among his friends and imparting by word of mouth the news of that momentous event.

The advance sale at Smith's drug-store took on a sudden impetus, and by 4 P.M. had reached the grand total of one hundred and seventy-five dollars. Muggs was in a frenzy of delight.

"That means S. R. O.," he jubilantly announced. "I guess yar Uncle Hez ain't a wise old gazebo. Puttin' that kid on was a masterstroke."

The evening came at last, and the doors of Tucker's Opera-House were thrown open at seven o'clock. There was a rush of boys and loafers up the gallery stairs for the unreserved seats.

The band got out their brass instruments, and gave an open air concert that attracted a large crowd. When this was over the people lined up at the box-office.

"You'll sell out," said old Tucker to Muggs. "This is the biggest house we've had since 'Uncle Tom' with two Evas and the Assyrian jackasses."

Up in a dressing-room, which he shared with a number of his new companions, Patsy was blacking up, and in this delicate operation he was assisted by several obliging fellow artists.

The dress coat hung rather baggily on him, and was more adapted to a negro comedian, but when he got on his white tie and celluloid collar he made quite a presentable appearance.

"All ready for the first part!" shouted the stage manager out in the hall, whereupon there was a general exodus toward the stage.

The musicians took their positions on raised platforms at the back, the singers, with Patsy among them, arranged themselves in the charmed circle at each side of the interlocutor, while the comedians occupied the ends.

At a nod from the stage manager the house electrician turned up the footlights.

There followed almost immediately a loud stamping of feet and whistling shrieks from the gallery as the curtain rose to a pandemonium of brass, to which the whole company standing contributed their most heroic vocal efforts.

When this hurrah opening was over the interlocutor with all the grace of manner for which he was noted throughout the profession said, in a courtly tone:

"Gentlemen, be seated!"

CHAPTER III.

FOUNDED ON HIGH C.

"GRAND opening medley, 'Hear Dem Bells,'" supplemented Mr. Wilkins, the interlocutor, whereat the entire organization broke forth uproariously into:

"Hear dem bells!
Can't you hear dem bells?
Dey am ringin' out
De glory ob de day!"

The Bohee Brothers on the ends performed remarkable stunts with the tambo and bones, and the combined efforts of the company evoked vociferous applause.

Patsy sat in his chair on the interlocutor's right, the place of honor among the ballad-singers, and there was a terrible goneness in his stomach. He was trembling all over, and he felt too weak to stand on his legs.

Many a time he had held down a seat in the gallery of Tucker's Opera-House, the guest of traveling theatrical organizations, and it had always impressed him as a rather cramped place.

Now, over the glare of the foots he beheld it in its true light—a vast auditorium that held a mighty multitude.

He tried to think of the words of the song, " Girl o' Mine," but his mind was a perfect blank, and he was dazed and stupefied.

" Mr. Wilkins," he heard as in a dream one of the Bohee Brothers say, " dese am troublous times dis country am a habin'."

" Yes, Bones," came Mr. Wilkins's voice from far away, " but I have no doubt that Mr. Wilson can handle the situation. He is a very bellicose President."

" Mr. Wilkins," said Bones, " ain't you t'inkin' ob Taft?"

There came a roar of laughter that seemed borne from the next county to Patsy, and Tambo interjected:

" Dis cost ob high libbin's gittin' mighty serious, Mr. Wilkins. Meat's high, but it ain't as high as it once wuz."

" Why, when was it higher, Tambo?"

" When de cow jumped ober de moon!"

" We will now have the heart-touching ballad, ' Rich Man, Poor Man,' " announced Mr. Wilkins, " rendered by the world-famous barytone, Mr. Banks Gilgan."

Mr. Gilgan, a short, fat person with an over-developed paunch, rose from his chair. Twiddling his oriode watch-chain, he confidently advanced to the footlights, and sang, with much feeling and expression:

" While the Goulds and Vanderbilts
Are all lying under quilts,
  Many have to rest their bones upon a board;
While like haughty kings and queens
They ride in their limousines,
  There are some so poor they can't afford a
      Ford!"

Then the mixed quartet in the semicircle rose as one man, and coming forward until they stood in a line directly behind the soloist, took up the refrain, bringing out its full beauty with exquisite barber-shop chords:

" Rich man, poor man, beggarman, thief,
Some born to good times, some born to grief;
Some lucky hicks, with their baths and their dope,
And other ginks nix on the towels and soap!"

Mr. Gilgan aided and abetted by the quartet scored his customary knockout, taking encore after encore, until Bones, after repeated efforts to make himself heard, finally succeeded in asking:

" Can you tell me why a chicken crosses the street, Mr. Wilkins?"

" Why, that's an old one, Bones. To get on the other side, of course."

" You're wrong, Mr. Wilkins. She does it to get away from Hank Green, Squantum's dude masher."

This was a local gag, so, of course, it got over big.

" Have you got a piece of toast, Mr. Wilkins?" inquired Tambo pathetically.

" A piece of toast? Why do you want a piece of toast, Tambo?"

" I'm a poached egg," was Tambo's response. " I'm tired, an' I wanna lie down."

Then, without relying further on Mr. Wilkins's capable assistance, the Bohee Brothers came center, and started their quick-fire conversation act which had proved so popular the season before when they were out with the Kickapoo Indian Medicine Show. It ran something like this:

" Say, my mother-in-law's jaw's all swelled up so she can't talk."

" That's bad."

" No, that's good. My father-in-law had a big chunk taken out of him by a bulldog."

" That's bad."

" No, that's good. He's got ptomaine poisoning."

" Who, the old man?"

" No, the bulldog."

" That's good."

" No, that's bad. Dr. Hoosey's treatin' him."

" Who's he?"

" Yes, Hoosey."

" Who's he?"

" Hoosey."

" I said who's he?"

" I heard you. Hoosey."

"No, no, you don't understand me. Who's he?"

"I understand you all right. Hoosey."

"Say, they'll stand for murder in this town," growled Wilkins in an aside to Patsy, as the Bohees topped off their interminable patter with a Virginny Essence. "You're next on the bill, kid, and I'm going to give you a bang-up send-off."

The Bohees at the finish of their turn took their places on the ends triumphant and perspiring, and Mr. Wilkins stood up, with hand upraised to check the still tumultuous applause.

Once he had been a lecturer in a dime museum and he was noted for his ready, fluent tongue. He was much in demand at social gatherings of the Elks.

"Ladies and gents," he said, "you have long had in your midst one, who, in the words of the poet, has blushed unseen and wasted his sweetness on the desert air. This remarkable genius, for so he may be termed, has on the statement of no less than the eminent musical authority, Signor Novello, a mellifluous vocal organ with the phenomenal range of five full octaves. Do you realize what that means, ladies and gents? An octave has eight notes—five octaves, forty. Caruso can only sing thirty-seven—the higher the fewer. Ladies and gents, I take great pleasure in introducing to you Mr. Patsy McGuire, who will henceforth be known to fame as Mr. Harold Evermond."

Patsy made a desperate effort to get on his feet, but he seemed paralyzed. His legs went on strike, and refused to contribute to his support.

"Go to it, kid!" whispered Mr. Banks Gilgan encouragingly. "With such a spiel as that you ought to hog the whole show!"

Once again Patsy attempted to rise, and this time succeeded. His legs wabbled as he hesitatingly came toward the footlights, and he had an awful premonition that he was going to pitch headlong over into the orchestra pit.

Signor Novello, alternately scraping and directing with his bow, led his musical confrères through the mazes of the prelude of "Girl o' Mine," while Patsy gaped spellbound at the misty sea of faces before him.

He recognized in the first row the bald head of old Deacon Crankitt, a pillar of the Methodist Church, whose venerable visage had taken on a demoniacal expression, while others in the immediate neighborhood glared up at him like gargoyles and satyrs.

"Come on! We dare you!" they all seemed to be saying, and Patsy felt that they were thirsting for his blood.

His eyes fastened themselves upon an ebony-hued gentleman up in the gallery with an expansive smile that disclosed two rows of what appeared to be white tombstones, and while he frantically endeavored to recall the words of "Girl o' Mine" all he could think of was:

> "Nigger, nigger, never die!
> Black face an' chiney eye!"

Signor Novello and his musicians, with a full realization of the distressing situation, were tackling the prelude for the third time, but Patsy still withheld his vocal assistance. Suddenly a little boy in the gallery shouted out:

"Send fur a plumber! His pipes is bu'sted!"

This was the signal for indiscriminate hoots, jeers, and cat-calls from the gallery, mingled with the polite hisses of the parquette, and Mr. Wilkins, perceiving that first aid to the injured was required, advanced, and laid his hand pityingly on the helpless Patsy's shoulder.

"Ladies and gents," he shouted at the turbulent audience, "this is a pronounced case of what the learned medical fraternity would diagnose as *pedalis frigidis.* The singer's vocal glands have developed glanders. We will substitute as a pinch-hitter Mr. Roscoe Fothergill, the eminent basso profundo, who will make you sit up and take notice with 'Papa's Pants Will Soon Fit Johnny.'"

Firmly but gently he led Patsy off the stage while Mr. Fothergill strove to calm the enraged gathering with deep, rumbling tones that he conjured from the cavernous regions of his capacious stomach.

Past grinning youths of his acquaintance who served as nonunion stage-hands the crestfallen Patsy sneaked to the dressing-room, where he had prepared with blithe spirit for his Waterloo.

After stripping off his professional attire he tried to remove the burnt cork from his face with cold water from one of the pails in the room, and the streaks of black he could not get off accentuated his lugubrious appearance.

O'Brien, the transfer man, when he noted with great satisfaction Patsy's complete downfall, hastened back on the stage, and followed him to the dressing-room.

"You got a nerve comin' here!" cried Patsy when he saw him.

"What did I tell ye?" said O'Brien, undisturbed by this chilly reception. "I knowed you'd be an awful piece o' cheese. But I've got a forgivin' disposition, I have. You kin come back to the stable."

"I'll tramp first," said Patsy bitterly.

"That's what it 'll have to come to, my fine bucko," said O'Brien contemptuously. "After the flivver you've just made the minstrel boys won't want ye."

Just then Muggs looked in from the doorway.

"Say, young feller," he addressed Patsy, with the utmost cordiality, "you oughter use cocoa-butter when ye take off that cork."

Patsy turned his back to him.

"Kick me!" he groaned. "Kick me all over the place!"

"I should say not!" responded Muggs, with great enthusiasm. "Why, ye drew a six-hundred-dollar house!. Yer a sort o' mascot. I've got a hunch yer a gonna bring luck to the Megatharians."

"Ain't ye goin' to fire me?" asked Patsy, hardly believing his ears. "Kin I go troupin' with the boys?"

"Surest thing ye know," said Muggs. "Ye leave with us to-morrow!"

CHAPTER IV.

A MIX-UP AT MILLTOWN.

AFTER the performance Patsy lent a willing hand to Jones, the company's stage carpenter. The drops were rolled up and put in their tarpaulin coverings, the flats packed, and the trunks made ready for the transfer man to take to the depot.

When this work was finally accomplished Patsy went with Jones to the American House, where they doubled up in the latter's room for the night.

At nine o'clock the next morning the whole aggregation was at the railroad station to depart for Milltown, where it was booked.

The train rolled in on time, and Jones and Patsy saw that the equipment was safely stowed in the baggage-car.

Nearly all the troupe sought the smoker, where most of them were soon engrossed in penny-ante.

Muggs hastily came to Patsy, and said:

"Quick, young feller! Blooch!"

"Blooch!" echoed Patsy. "Why, what do ye mean?"

"Hide before the conductor starts takin' up the tickets, "I've got a party-ticket fur twenty, an' I'm a carryin' twenty-three in the troupe. Three's gotter blooch."

"Where kin I hide?" asked Patsy.

"Get down at the feet o' Gilgan an' Fothergill in that seat over there. They'll cover ye up with their overcoats an' newspapers, an' try to hide ye. Squeeze yerself in as much as you kin so the conductor won't see ye."

Patsy did as he was directed, and lay all crouched up at the bottom of the seat, occupying as little space as possible, while his fellow-conspirators spread themselves out, and arranged their belongings to screen him from sight.

The conductor started to take tickets, and when he reached Gilgan and Fothergill each said "Company," whereat he nodded and passed on, without noticing Patsy.

"It's all right, kid," said Gilgan at last, when Patsy felt that he was in danger of being suffocated. "He's in the next car now, and you can come out."

Patsy felt that he had a friend indeed in this Chesterfield of the minstrel profession, who was so careful of his personal appearance that he chalked his white spats and inked the black band on his lavender high hat each morning.

He crawled out from under the seat on his hands and feet, and noticed that his movements were being duplicated in every detail by two other members of the troupe in the immediate vicinity.

"Yes," Roscoe Fothergill was remarking, with pardonable pride, "'Papa's Pants Will Soon Fit Johnny' was a reg'lar knockout last night. I'm gonna write the publishers o' the song an' demand that they print my pitcher on the title-page."

"I suppose you'll shelve your ballad, 'Would I Were a Bird,'" said Gilgan casually.

"Yes," was Fothergill's response. "I've always felt a little leery about singin' it since that loafer up in the gallery yelled out, 'Would I Were a Gun!'"

When the train pulled in at Milltown Jones and Patsy hurried to the baggage-car to satisfy themselves that the company's equipment was put off.

"It's funny the transfer man ain't here," said Jones, as he looked around and failed to see anything resembling the object of his search. "Young feller, lemme use your phone, won't you? an' I'll give you a coupla skulls fur to-night's show."

"Skulls" were a synonym for complimentary tickets.

"If you're lookin' for Larkins, the expressman," the fellow said, thawing out genially, "his number's 52 Main. Come in the baggage-room, an' phone there."

Jones and Patsy followed him into the baggage-room, and soon Larkins was at the other end of the wire.

Meanwhile the rest of the troupe were making their way from the station to a dollar-and-a-quarter-a-day hotel. The Gem Theater in which they were to give their performance was conveniently adjacent.

The windows of the stores they passed fairly blazed with minstrel lithographs, and the sight was so impressive that Muggs, who was walking with Banks Gilgan, was impelled to say:

"Sniper's given us an elegant showin'. I was thinkin' o' cannin' that big lush, but he's certainly spread himself here."

Gilgan came to a sudden stop before the window of the undertaker. That worthy gentleman, in consideration of a pass for the night's performance, had succumbed to the blandishments of the advertising agent and had allowed him to fill the window with lithographs to the complete eclipse of his imposing funeral urn.

"Great Scott!" ejaculated Gilgan. "Just look at the dates!"

On a strip of paper pasted at the bottom of each lithograph was printed in bold red letters:

GEM THEATER,
Tuesday, September 7

MILLIKEN'S MASTODON MINSTRELS

40–COUNT 'EM–40

"What does this mean?" cried Muggs, who could hardly believe the evidence of his eyes. "Has that old son-of-a-gun, Doc Piper, double-crossed us?"

"To-day's September 7, ain't it?" asked Gilgan.

"Of course it is."

"Are you sure your contract is for the seventh?"

Muggs laid his valise down on the pavement, and, after fishing in his inside coat-pocket, exhumed a paper document.

"Here it is," he announced, opening a printed form. "There's the date as plain as the nose on your face, Tuesday, September 7, an' the terms is seventy-thirty. The old rascal must 'a' got things mixed an' booked the two shows fur the same night."

They quickened their steps toward the Gem Theater, which was owned and managed by the Dr. Piper referred to, for Muggs was anxious to hear what the latter would have to say.

In front of the Gem Theater, Milliken's Mastodons, in delicate light-green ulsters with high hats to match, had already formed for the customary parade, and among the crowd watching them were the members of Muggs's Megatharians, who had already arrived upon the scene.

There were recognitions between the rival exponents of burnt cork, with a lively banter of remarks seasoned with more or less humor.

Mad clean through, Muggs pushed his way past the throng to Dr. Piper's private office, where the local impresario was in the midst of a confabulation with Milliken, who conferred the honor of his name upon the Mastodons.

Milliken had on a black high silk hat, carefully kerosined to give it its pristine polish with high lights, a sack coat, striped trousers, and a cross-bar shirt with a red puff made-up tie which jauntily carried a stone of several karats that occasionally emitted a dubious yellow glare.

He and Muggs had met before, and a strong professional jealousy existed between them.

After greeting each other with frigid nods, Muggs turned at once to Dr. Piper, who was at his roll-top desk with its piled-up correspondence.

The doctor, as would naturally be inferred, was a medical practitioner who had held a mortgage on the theater. When it was sold at public auction he was obliged to bid it in to save himself. He had thus been forced into the theatrical business.

"Why, Mr. Muggs," he said, simulating surprise as he fastened his small, beady eyes on Muggs, "what are you doin' here in Milltown?"

"What am I doin'?" repeated Muggs, trying to control his temper. "I gotta contract to play with ye to-night."

"Oh, no, you ain't!"

"What do ye call this?" asked Muggs, holding out the document of which he spoke.

"Why, that ain't no good," said Dr. Piper. "It ain't wu'th the paper it's written on. It's null an' void, as the lawyers would put it."

"Why ain't it any good?" demanded Muggs.

"I heard yer show was on the bum, so I canceled ye a week ago," was Dr. Piper's cheerful response. "I gave the date to Milliken here."

"Yes, an' I'm gonna fill it," growled Milliken.

"I never received any notice o' cancellation," said Muggs to Piper wrathfully.

"That's your look-out, not mine," said the doctor. "Ye'll have to take that up with the post-office authorities."

"Why, ye dirty old skunk," exploded Muggs, "do ye think you kin pull off any bunk like that? I'll sue ye fur damages. Yes, an' I'll get out an injunction an' stop yer show to-night."

"No, you won't," broke in Milliken angrily. "I've gotta contract to give it."

"So have I gotta contract."

"Yours ain't no good."

"It's just as good as yours."

"No, it ain't, either. Yours is canceled."

"I'll see a lawyer about this."

"So will I."

"I'll see my lawyer, too," chimed in Dr. Piper. "If ye want law ye'll git yer bellyful of it!"

Just then their ears were deafened by a tremendous blare of brass from outside. Milliken's Mastodons were just about to take up the line of march. Banners that boys held proudly aloft bore the announcement:

MILLIKEN'S MASTODON MINSTRELS!
40—COUNT 'EM—40!
TO-NIGHT!

Muggs rushed to the entrance of the Gem Theater and stood watching them with a dark scowl on his face. Jones and Patsy, who had just arrived with the outfit on Larkins's scene-truck, noticed him.

"Say, boss," cried Jones, out of breath, "what 'll we do? We're barred from the theater, an' they won't take in our stuff."

"Open up the trunks," directed Muggs, "an' get the uniforms an' instruments out. Tell the boys to hustle up that parade."

The change was made in the big sample-room of the United States Hotel. Boys whose services were hastily secured carried banners inscribed:

MUGGS'S MEGATHARIAN MINSTRELS!
40—COUNT 'EM—40!
TO-NIGHT!

CHAPTER V.

RIOTING IN MARKET SQUARE.

MUGGS watched his Honey Boys depart with a feeling of mingled pride and elation, and he threw a scornful look back at Milliken and Dr. Piper who had also come out with consuming curiosity to view them.

The music of the rival bands rose blatantly on the air from the various routes they traversed, and it was plain to be seen that each was trying to raise the greater ruction.

Feeling the need of a bracer after his disturbing experience, Muggs went into the bar of the United States Hotel. At the same time Milliken and Dr. Piper left the Gem Theater and walked together down Main Street.

Not only did Muggs require a stimulent for his shattered nerves, but he wanted a little information.

"Who's a good lawyer in this town?" he asked the white-aproned bartender who absent-mindedly put the coin he was tendered in his pocket and neglected to ring up the cash register.

"I guess Lawyer Skinner's as good as any," was the response. "When they ketch me—I mean if I ever need a lawyer—he's the baby fur me. They say he'll stop at nothin'."

"Where's his office?"

"In the Farmers' Loan and Trust Buildin', further down the street."

Straight to Lawyer Skinner's, Muggs made his way, little recking that at the same time Milliken and Dr. Piper were engaged in earnest conference with Ketchum and Cheatum, the astute counselors in the Iron Bank Building just across the way.

Lawyer Skinner was chiefly notable for a damp bald head. He saw things darkly through the medium of a pair of glasses purchased at the Red-Front Five and Ten Cent department-store. When he heard Muggs's step outside in the hall he hastily put away a deck of cards and reached for the impressive Agricultural Report his Congressman had sent him.

"One of the visiting thespians, I take it," he said as Muggs entered. "My dear sir, what can I do for you?"

"My name is Muggs," said the manager, "an' I'm the proprietor o' Muggs's Megatharian Minstrels."

"The fame of your admirable organization is, of course, familiar to me," said Skinner, "but I've never yet had the pleasure of witnessing one of its performances."

"I gotta little legal bus'ness fur you."

"In that case my retainer's ten dollars."

Muggs peeled off the wrapper of a big roll and handed it to the other, who, after regarding it with some suspicion, put it carefully away in an empty billfold.

"Now, my good sir," said Lawyer Skinner, "will you please elucidate?"

"Say," cried Muggs, regarding the other in surprise, "have you ever been in the minstrel bus'ness?"

"Why, no," said Skinner, "though I've often been told I should have been an actor. But why do you ask?"

"That word elucidate caught me. I thought you might have been an interlocutor."

"No, whatever my ambitions may have been, I have heroically kept them within bounds, and clung to the prosaic profession of the law. But will you kindly state the nature of the business on which you seek my advice?"

"Why, I hold a contract with Dr. Piper fur my troupe to play his joint to-night, an' he's gonna let another show appear instead."

"Just let me see the contract."

Muggs handed it to him, and he ran his eye professionally over it.

"Why, my dear sir," he announced, "this contract is as good as gold!"

"Then I gotta suit?" said Muggs jubilantly.

"You've not only got a suit, but you've got an extra pair of breeches," said Skinner with a knowing wink. "Why, that contract would hold in any court in the land."

At the very same moment Milliken and Dr. Piper were in Ketchum and Cheatum's office. Ketchum happened to be saying:

"Why, he ain't got a leg to stand on. We'll make him give bond, and if need be, take the case up to the Supreme Court. Tell him to sue and be— What's all that confounded racket?"

A sudden uproar rose from the street below, and all four rushed to the windows and looked out.

Attracted by the same commotion, Muggs and Lawyer Skinner were looking out from a window opposite.

It was market day in Milltown, and the farmers and hucksters were in the public square disposing of agricultural products from wagons and improvised stands.

Both minstrel organizations had selected the market square as a vantage ground for wide publicity, and they had anchored there in all their regalia, while the bands were trying frantically to outdo each other in their brassy clamor.

Jeers and taunts flew from the lips of one faction to the other, and were hurled back with increasing violence. Reflections upon each other's professional ability flew fast and thick, and grew more acrimonious each minute.

Finally one of the enraged Bohee Brothers spied a near-by pile of over-ripe tomatoes that had been discarded by a huckster, and a happy inspiration came to him.

"Up, men, an' at 'em!" he yelled, and hurled a decaying specimen in the midst of the Mastodons.

"Attaboy!" cried his brother, as it squashed on the lapel of the delicate green ulster of the cornet player, its crimson pulp resembling a full-blown rose.

The indignation of the cornet player was acute. He and his musical colleagues at once stopped playing, and, furiously providing themselves with munitions from an egg stand conveniently near, began hurling them at the Megatharians, who retaliated with a fusillade of tomatoes.

Eggs and tomatoes hurtled through the air, and the mayor of Milltown, who was one of the distracted observers, ran with all speed into Hobbs's drug-store, grabbed the receiver of the telephone, and called excitedly for the number of the chief of police.

"Hello!" he cried. "Is this you, chief? This is the mayor talking."

"Yes, mayor."

"Chief, the minstrels are rioting down in the market square."

"You don't say, mayor!"

"You'd better arrest 'em, chief. There'll be enough fines to pay both our salaries for a whole year."

"How many are there, mayor?"

"There must be a hundred, chief."

"It can't be done, mayor. The jail ain't big enough to hold 'em."

The mayor hung up the receiver with a jerk, yanking it down almost immediately, and yelling to the operator:

"Hello, central, this is the mayor! Connect me with the fire department."

"Hello, chief! This is the mayor talking," he said in a moment. "The minstrels are rioting in the market square, and you'd better send the water-tower!"

Egg-splattered and tomato-splashed, the Mastodons and Megatharians had closed in on each other and were in the midst of belligerent warfare.

The musicians were engaged in the manner of duelists, and were using their cornets, clarinets, trombones, and other instruments like swords as they expertly parried each other's lunges and thrusts.

The Bohee Brothers, end men and sidewalk conversationalists, had singled out the Quigley Twins who did the silver-statue clog.

Mr. Wilkins was mixing things up with Mr. Peters, the rival interlocutor, and both were sparring with all the grace, elegance, and refinement inseparably associated with their particular vocation. The basso, Roscoe Fothergill, who could monkey with subterranean notes in "Way Deep Down in the Cellar," had for his opponent the equally eminent basso, Roger Gansevoort, whose specialty was "A Thousand Fathoms Deep."

Up dashed the water-tower, manned by the volunteer fire department, and a standpipe connection was effected with all the celerity for which "Neptune No. 1" was celebrated.

The chief, through a fire trumpet, gave orders, and an immense stream of water was projected at the maddened belligerents, who gave no heed, but fought on.

Muggs, Milliken, and their lawyers had joined the sightseers, and noted that conditions were becoming more and more desperate.

The minstrel magnates saw the possible destruction of their respective organizations at the hands of each other, yet both seemed helpless to prevent such a terrible catastrophe. But even in his very helplessness the well-known diplomacy of Muggs asserted itself.

In a clarion voice he suddenly shouted: "Gentlemen, be seated!"

CHAPTER VI.

MUGGS PLAYS A TRUMP CARD.

THOSE three words Muggs bellowed out to the infuriated minstrels had as magical an effect as a patent medicine.

They formed the interlocutor's stern mandate in the first part of every burnt-cork entertainment extant, and the canons of the noble profession would have been grossly violated in a refusal to obey them.

Instinctively when they heard those words, "Gentlemen, be seated!" Megatharians and Mastodons ceased all hostilities, and as one man attempted to assume sitting postures, the more absent-minded firm in the conviction that chairs were under them, which caused them to sprawl all over the ground.

Sober reason began to assert itself, and all further danger was over. The firemen promptly stopped squirting water on the artists, but in doing so the hose got away from them and soaked quite a considerable portion of the populace.

"Megatharians," Muggs addressed the disciples of his banner, as they valiantly gathered round him, "I'm proud of ye. Ye've won on points. There's more tomata stains on their uniforms than there's egg-stains on ours. There ain't no disputin' it, we've won!"

"Yes, ye have!" sneered Milliken. "You'll see how much you've won after you've got charges of assault pressed against ye."

"Take the sky fur yer limit!" challenged Muggs. "I'll prefer counter-charges."

"All those beautiful uniforms have been ruined," groaned Milliken. "The tomata-stains 'll never come off."

"They'll come off easier 'n the egg-stains off o' mine," retorted Muggs. "It's me that's the sufferer. But I ain't complainin'. Some one 'll smart fur this."

He glowered at Dr. Piper, who came up and stood beside Milliken to lend him his moral support.

"Meanin' me, I s'pose," the worthy local manager returned. "Say, don't make none o' yer bluffs. I've talked with my lawyers, an' I know just where I stand. I've give Milliken here the date, an' he's gonna give the show to-night. The best thing you an' yer hamfatters kin do is to beat it out o' town!"

Here again the unquestioned ability of Muggs as the director of a great amusement enterprise was evidenced. One of the many inspirations that in a long managerial career had guided him safely through the rocks and shoals of disaster came suddenly to him.

"Say," he announced, with ill-concealed triumph, "I'm gonna put both you fellers on the blink!"

"Oh, you are, are ye?" taunted Milliken. "Why, ye poor nut, what kin you do?"

"Let him rave!" chuckled Dr. Piper. "He can't do nothin'."

"I can't, can't I?" said Muggs grimly. "I'll tell ye what I'm gonna do. I'm gonna give a free minstrel entertainment in the park to-night."

Dr. Piper and Milliken seemed considerably agitated.

"Come one, come all, an' be sure to bring the children," chanted Muggs. "There's nothin' to pay—it's free to ev'ryone. The grandest array o' minstrel talent in the world—an' you can view it without its costin' you a cent!"

"You're crazy!" cried Dr. Piper in alarm. "You wouldn't be fool enough to do a thing like that."

"You just wait an' see," said Muggs emphatically. "You know what's goin' to happen with a free show in opposition to ye, don't ye? Why, you won't draw even a jitney to the bum joint ye call yer op'ra-house. I'll have the whole town out in the park to-night. It's elegant weather fur an outdoor show."

"Don't fly off yer handle, Muggs," broke in the more politic Milliken. "Maybe we kin fix this thing up."

"What do you want to do?" Dr. Piper

asked him sharply. “Going to give him yer date?”

“Not by a long shot,” said Milliken stubbornly.

“I don’t want you to,” said Muggs. “All I ask is an even break. Let’s double up the two companies an’ have ’em both give a show to-night. They’d oughter pack the house.”

Dr. Piper at once scented capacity receipts by such an arrangement, with a distinct advantage to himself in the important matter of terms, and his attitude suddenly changed to extreme geniality.

“That’s a good idee,” he said. “I’m willin’.”

“Of course, you are, you old skinflint!” cried Muggs. “With the terms standin’ as they are, seventy-thirty per cent, it ’d be a cinch fur you. But you’ll have to sweeten the pot with an extra twenty—ten fur Milliken an’ ten fur me.”

“That’s robbery,” groaned Dr. Piper. “I’ll keep the Gem Theater dark fust. I’ve never give up such terms yet.”

“You will to-night,” said Muggs decidedly. “Are you with me, Milliken?”

“You bet!” was Milliken’s hearty response. “That’s the only way he’ll git the Megatharians an’ Mastodons combined.”

“It’s a hold-up,” affirmed Dr. Piper. “You’ve both got the James Brothers skinned to death. Why, I never give up more’n seventy-five per cent to ‘Uncle Josh Spruceby,’ ‘Si Plunkard,’ an’ them other big shows! Have a heart! Let’s split ’n call it eighty.”

“Only ninety goes,” said Muggs. “Take it, or we’ll close up yer show to-night.”

“You got me by the throat,” said Dr. Piper, “an’ I got to give in. But, if this thing keeps up, I’ll give my house over to the movies!”

“Come on,” said Muggs. “Let’s draw another contract.”

They started off, and Lawyer Skinner, who was an interested observer, overtook them and tapped Muggs on the shoulder.

“What is it?” asked Muggs, turning around.

“My dear sir,” said Skinner, “shall we press the suit?”

“Me an’ my friend here,” said Muggs humorously, as he linked his arm in Milliken’s, “’ll be too busy pressin’ uniforms. Beat it!”

“Good day, sir!” said Lawyer Skinner, and he clattered up the wooden stairs to his office.

In Piper’s office at the Gem Theater a new contract was subsequently prepared that was satisfactory to both Muggs and Milliken.

“Now we all got to circus this to beat the band,” said Muggs. “Gimme some scratch paper, Doc, an’ I’ll git up copy fur some handbills.”

And then, devoting much care and thought to the subject, he evolved the following, making deep drafts upon the storehouse of his alliterations:

TO-NIGHT—GEM THEATER—TO-NIGHT

Two Shows for the Price of One!

Our Loss Your Gain!

MUGGS’S MEGATHARIAN MINSTRELS!

40—COUNT ’EM—40!

MILLIKEN’S MASTODON MINSTRELS!

40—COUNT ’EM—40!

Eighty Ebony Entertainers in Their Enormous Entirety!

Greatest, Grandest, Most Glorious Galaxy of
Gaggers, Grotesques, & Grin-Gatherers
Ever Garnered from the Globe!

14 Famous Funny Fellows 14
In Frivolous Flights of Fancy!

17 Superlatively Sweet Singers 17
In Sensational Song-Successes! A Rattling,
Refined, Recherche Revue—Numberless
Nifty Novelties—A Colossal Coterie
of Clever Classy Cloggers—
America’s Acknowledged
Adepts of Acrobatic
Ability—
Etc., Etc., Etc. ! ! !

COME ONE! COME ALL!

BRING THE CHILDREN! NO ADVANCE
IN PRICES! .25-.50-.75, $1.00.

“That ’ll ketch ’em!” cried Dr. Piper enthusiastically when the author had declaimed his brain-child with great dramatic intensity. “Them words all beginnin’ with R’s an’ A’s an’ G’s is hot stuff, an’ oughter make the suckers line up at the box-office to beat the band. Seems to me you've got the prices purty high, though."

"I have boosted 'em a little," admitted Muggs; "but they'll stand fur it. The public 'll stand fur anything. Milliken, pass the word along, an' hustle the boys out fur a double parade. I'll git some o' these *Heralds* printed right off at the newspaper office, an' flood the town with 'em."

After he had started the foreman of the *Daily Banner* on a rush order, Muggs dropped in on the editor and found him hard at work on an article about the minstrels' fracas a short time before.

"Just put a tag on that," instructed Muggs, "an' say both troupes 'll positively appear at the Gem Theater to-night in a grand double bill fur the single price of admission."

As he spoke the blare of brass suddenly smote the air, and rushing to the window they beheld the two troupes, in uniforms still damp from the wetting of the fire-department, march majestically past.

Patsy, in a pearl-colored ulster and high hat, strode with head held up in the jaunty ranks of the Megatharians, and his heart thrilled as he lightly swung his cane.

Before the doors of the Gem Theater opened that night there was a large, impatient crowd waiting, and it swelled to immense proportions when the bands of both minstrel companies began their free open-air concert.

In an incredibly short time the tickets in the box-office rack melted away before the public demand, and the treasurer began selling standing room.

"Git their dough," instructed Dr. Piper, who was an interested observer. "Jam 'em in to the back wall."

In one of the overcrowded dressing-rooms Patsy blacked up for the first part, and with a fast-beating heart he asked Mr. Wilkins:

"Do I sing to-night?"

"What, with this vast array of talent?" returned the interlocutor, as he put on his newly scrubbed celluloid front over his red-flannel undershirt. "Why, my boy, you're lucky to hold down a chair in such fast company. You'd be snowed under with such great singers as Roscoe Fothergill, Banks Gilgan, Tomasso Twitterwit, Galvin McTush, an' others—the cream, so to speak, of the whole minstrel world. An' remember there's the Bohee Brothers an' Quigley Twins besides, to say nothin' of the McNutts an' their trained jackass. Believe me, kid, this is some bill, so consider yourself fortunate you're an also-ran."

CHAPTER VII.

"MAIZIE, MAIZIE, SETS THE BOYS CRAZY!"

THERE was terrific applause that shook the very rafters of the house when the curtain rose on the elaborate first part.

"This old buildin' oughter be condemned," said the chief of police who, of course, had been admitted free. "It don't meet the fire-law requirements."

"I'm gonna make Piper put in more fire-escapes," said the mayor, who likewise had come in gratis. "Yes, an' he's gotta have more extinguishers, chief."

"I'll inspect the hull buildin' to-morrer, mayor," said the chief, "an' we'll soak him good an' hard."

Two interlocutors sat with easy grace in the middle, and the faultlessly attired black-faced soloists and choristers were arranged semicircularly in a double row of chairs, some of which had been borrowed from the undertaker's establishment, while the Bohee Brothers and Quigley Twins occupied the ends. The two bands, directed by their respective *maestros,* Signor Novello and M. Lafayette D'Artignan, were crowded into the picturesque raised background.

"Where's the eighty they advertise?" sniffed an angular, shrewish-faced woman down in one of the front rows. "I kin only count thirty-nine."

The performance proceeded, with more or less satisfaction to the beholders, and out in the manager's office, entirely oblivious of the artistic side of the entertainment, Dr. Piper, Muggs, and Milliken were busy in apportioning the spoils.

"Eight hundred and twenty dollars," Piper announced as the amount of the total receipts. "That shows all the suckers ain't dead yet. An' all I git out of it is a measly eighty-two dollars. You two hog all the rest. It ain't a square deal; but, of course, you'll pay fur the handbills."

"Say, doc," Muggs broke in, "yer so close an' mean I've heard you use the wart on the back of yer neck instead of a collar-button. Yes, an' I bet you talk through yer nose to save the wear an' tear on yer false teeth. You'll come across with yer share of the cost o' them fliers, so no matter how much it hurts, just try to smile an' look pleasant."

"Them receipts," commented Milliken, "shows how the Mastodons draw."

"Don't ye fool yerself," said Muggs. "It was the Megatharians done it."

The first part wound up in a blaze of glory with a grand patriotic finale, and after a brief intermission the musicians, still in black face, came out from under the stage and took their places in the orchestra pit.

After they had rendered an overture there followed a sparkling olio in which the Bohee Brothers, the Quigley Twins, Billy Kazan in a stump speech, with his long, black gloves, green umbrella, and cigar butt, the Juggling Jacksons, the McNutts with their trick jackass, and other equally well-known artists appeared. The curtain fell at last on the afterpiece, "Down on de Ol' Plantation Befo' de Wah," which enlisted the full strength of both companies.

After this memorable performance Patsy hastily washed up and got in his street clothes, after which he assisted Jones, the Megatharian's carpenter, with the pack-up. At the same time the Mastodon's staff were getting their outfit ready for the transfer man.

At the bar of the United States Hotel a large number of the members of both troupes, with their differences of the morning forgotten, were holding high carnival when later Jones and Patsy joined them.

Two drummers who had attended the entertainment were also at the bar absorbing liquid nourishment, and one of these asked the other.

"What did you think of the McNutts and their jackass?"

"The jackass," remarked his companion, "was good."

The minstrels' jollification at the bar was continued later in the seclusion of their rooms, where soon a number of interesting card-parties were in full blast.

Their fund of good spirits reached such supreme heights that the drummers, quartered in their immediate vicinity, could not sleep, and in their pajamas they complained bitterly to the hotel proprietor, who swore a solemn oath that he would never take in show folks again.

At the preposterously early hour of seven-thirty next morning the Megatharians made their get-away for Jayville, their next stand, and there was much grumbling in consequence. The more fortunate Mastodons were still wrapped in slumber, for the train which was to take them to Binger's Falls, which was in another direction, did not leave till nine o'clock.

Patsy made for the smoker, where he again successfully "blooched," and when the train arrived at Jayville he hastened to the baggage-car in the performance of his duties.

The transfer wagon was backed up at the platform, and while Jones went into the baggage-room ostensibly on some business with the agent, but in reality to "soldier" and shift the work on the shoulders of his young assistant, Patsy aided with the loading of the equipment on the scene-truck.

While they were actively engaged in the work a train arrived from the opposite direction, and a young girl was among the passengers who got off. Both conductor and brakeman were almost painful in their solicitude as they helped her to alight safely.

Patsy paused in his work to observe them, and when he saw her face he absolved them from all blame.

"A pip!" was his involuntary ejaculation.

Possibly eighteen, and about one hundred and twenty delicious pounds in the package. Neither fat nor thin—curves that would set a baseball pitcher crazy. Little coal-scuttle hat from under which a few roguish curls strayed. Such eyes—such a nose—such a mouth! Wrist-watch, of course, and her plump, trim little feet incased in high white shoes.

Flashing a bewitching smile of gratitude at the courteous railroad officials, she paddled off with a baby dress-suit-case in her dimpled hand toward the busy marts of the town, while they looked after her stupefied.

In his great excitement the conductor forgot to signal to the engineer to go on, and as a result the train rolled in three minutes late to the next station.

Patsy gazed at her too, and he was so overcome that he let a trunk fall on the toes of the transfer man.

Others, too, were similarly affected by the entrancing vision, and three husky depot loungers of the bucolic mashing variety quickened their steps with the evident determination to overtake her. Jealously Patsy watched them.

" Ah, there, my chicken?" hailed one ingratiatingly. " Say, what's your hurry?"

Like a stag at bay she turned upon them, and the indignant red that suddenly flushed her cheeks only made them more becoming.

" Go away, you big loafers," she cried angrily, " or I'll call for the police!"

But the solitary policeman on duty at the station was just then in the baggage-room exerting all his diplomacy to secure from Jones a free ticket for the coming show.

" Aw, what's eatin' you?" said another of the rustic Don Juans. " Come on, an' we'll blow you to a sa'sf'rilla at Green's ice-cream parlor."

Patsy did not wait to hear any more, but with head lowered, charged upon them like a maddened bull.

One, who was directly in his devastating path, turned turtle, and on recovering his feet fled with discreet haste. The other two, confident in their superior numbers, offered resistance, and almost instantly Patsy was mixing it up with them in a rough-and-tumble scrimmage.

Here the admirable athletic training he had received in handling pianos and other objects of not inconsiderable weight in his long servitude with O'Brien the expressman, stood him in good stead, and his hard fists, propelled by steel-like muscles, wrought terrible havoc.

After they had been knocked down a number of times, his opponents, with countenances promiscuously decorated by well-directed right and left jabs, joined their companion in flight, and the beautiful maiden he had succored said, in a thrilling voice:

" Thank you, ever so much. It seems to me you're wasting your time here. I should think you could get one of those managers of boxing bouts to match you for a go at Madison Square Garden."

Then, with a melting smile, she tripped off up the street, leaving Patsy, hat in hand, nursing with his tongue a cut lip, his only souvenir of the encounter.

Slowly he went back to the railroad platform, where the prosaic work of loading the truck was resumed.

" You want to cut all that stuff out, kid," said Jones, who was smoking a cigar the baggage-man had given him. " The boss won't stand fur mashers an' booze-fighters."

Patsy rode up with Jones on the wagon to the Park Theater, and when they arrived there was dumfounded to see Muggs talking to his divinity at the entrance.

" Evermond," said the minstrel manager to Patsy as he jumped off from the back, " let me introduce ye to my daughter, Miss Maizie Muggs."

" We have met before, pa," said Maizie, as Patsy took awkwardly the little hand she held out to him.

" Met before?" repeated Muggs in surprise. " Why, Maizie, I don't understand ye."

Maizie flashed a radiant look upon Patsy.

" Mr. Evermond," she said, " saved my life!"

CHAPTER VIII.

GIRL O' MINE!

" SAVED yer life!" echoed her astonished father. " Why, Maizie, my child, I don't quite get ye."

" When I got off the train," explained

Maizie, " there were three big ruffians who attacked me—yes, and in broad daylight! I'm sure they had murderous designs, for I had seven dollars and thirty-five cents in my pocketbook. But fortunately Mr. Evermond happened to be near and saved me. Pa, I'm firmly convinced I owe my life to him."

" Oh, I dunno about that," said the modest hero. " Maybe them guys was only a little fresh."

" Well, just the same, kid," said the appreciative parent, yer good fur a touch any time. Just wait here with Maizie while I go in an' see if there's any letters or telegrams."

" Let me hold yer grip," said Patsy to Maizie.

She handed him the dress-suit-case with such an adorable smile that instantly his eyes sought the pavement in great confusion.

" Hurry up," growled Jones to him, " an' give us a lift with these here trunks."

" Can't you see he's holding her grip?" said Muggs sharply, as he went into the theater vestibule.

" Pa's a dear, but he's somewhat uncouth," went on Maizie to Patsy after her father had gone. " I've been up with his sister on the farm near Fredonia since the show went out, but I just couldn't stand it any longer. Not but what they're up to date, Aunt Martha and Uncle Jason, for, goodness knows, they get the catalogues of all the mail-order department houses. Still there isn't a movie-house within five miles of the farm, and they haven't even got a Ford. That's why I cut sticks and landed here in Jayville. Pa can't lose me. I'm going to travel with him and the boys."

" Ain't you on the stage?" stammered Patsy.

" No," said Maizie. " I want to go in grand opera, but if I can't be in that, then I'd like to be in the Ziegfield Follies. I can wear tights all right. I could have gone out with the ' Puss, Puss ' company, but that's burlesque, and two a day. So, until things break for yours truly, I'm going to hike it out in the tall grass with pop and the boys. A woman with her refined presence can exert a great influence on the whole bunch."

Patsy could have listened to her forever, but just then he saw Muggs come from the theater with a telegram in his hand.

" Girlie," he said impulsively to Maizie, " yer the goods all right, an' I'm dead stuck on you!"

" Please don't think me forward," returned Maizie with charming candor, " when I say that you, too, are all to the mustard."

" I've just received a wire from the McNutts," said Muggs, as he joined them. " Where's the telegraph office?"

It happened to be in the opera-house block, just at the right of the entrance, and Patsy pointed it out. Thereupon Maizie and he accompanied the manager into the office, where the latter casually inspected the telegram again.

> Have just closed with Mastodons at Binger's Falls. Can you use us and the jackass in Megatharians?
>
> THE McNUTTS.

Muggs dashed off the response:

> Can use jackass
>
> GEORGE L. MUGGS.

" Send it collect," he instructed the operator. Then, turning to Maizie, he added:

" An' now, little daughter, let's go to the Mansion House, where I'll try to git the bridal chamber fur you at a professional rate. The best is none too good fur ye. Harold, Maizie's trunk is down at the depot. Git the transfer man to hustle it up at once."

With his goddesslike daughter the minstrel magnate started off down the street, the cynosure of admiring eyes, while Patsy flew to execute the delicate commission with which he had been intrusted.

Later the minstrels in their pearl-colored ulsters and high hats formed in front of the theater for the customary parade, and Patsy proudly took his place among them.

The line of march led past the Mansion House, and looking up he saw Maizie standing at the window of the corner room on the second floor.

There were recognitions on the part of

all the minstrels, who doffed their pearl-colored high hats to her, while Maizie kept smiling and bowing, wafting with her little fingers many kisses in return.

Mazie, Mazie,
She sets the boys crazy!

Sang Banks Gilgan, and Patsy transmitted with his finger-tips a tender osculatory message that brought a most enchanting smile to her red lips, while she nodded her pretty little head again and again at him.

The circumstance was noted by Bill Bohee, who marched with his brother Gus, immediately back of Patsy, and he glowered at him with jealous rage.

"Don't git too fresh!" he growled.

Later, when Patsy went into the dining-room of the hotel, he saw Muggs and Maizie seated at a small table in the corner by themselves.

He was about to take a chair at a long table where a number of his brother professionals were already gathered when Maizie called out to him, and pointed to the chair that was vacant beside her.

"Won't you feed your face with us, Mr. Evermond?" she asked with a winning smile, and Patsy awkwardly seated himself.

Looking over at the other table he could see Bill Bohee glaring fiercely at him.

"I'm gonna have trouble with that guy," he thought uneasily.

"Pa," remarked Maizie casually, over the soup, "I heard from ma the other day, and she says you're shy on the alimony again."

"Bus'ness ain't as good as it might 'a' been, Maizie," he said apologetically. "Besides, I was innocent, though circumstantial evidence was all against me. No, Maizie, I was too honer'ble to make a contest, so yer mother soaked me. But I could 'a' put up a nasty fight, just the same!"

"After all, pa," said Maizie pensively, "there was no place like home."

"No, kid, sit right where ya are," said her father with some feeling. "If home had been like any other place I could 'a' stood fur it. Your mother was always naggin' me about wimmin. Well, what if I did meet 'em? Ain't a man in this perfession got to meet wimmin? Thank Heaven, I kept the names o' innocent parties out o' the suit!"

"Hadn't I better sit at the other table?" suggested Patsy timidly. "Maybe you two w'd like to talk alone."

"No, kid, sit right where ye are," said Muggs. "The thing was well aired in the dramatic papers anyhow. There was a whole lot o' dirty linen washed, but I come out clean!"

Then to the waiter-girl, who was a fascinated listener, he added:

"You kin take away the soup!"

Patsy looked over at Bill Bohee, who was still glowering at him, and remarked:

"What's the matter with that guy? He looks sore."

"It's a case of lovers once, but strangers now," said Maizie sweetly. "Mr. Bohee pursued me with his attentions all last season, though dear knows I never gave him the slightest encouragement. I don't see why he should be offended. He never made me an expensive gift, only picture postal-cards."

"If he tries to git gay with me," said Patsy impressively, "I'll bu'st in his slats!"

Muggs did not join in the conversation that ensued, but glanced through the remainder of the meal at the first edition of the afternoon paper he held in his hand. A paragraph that particularly interested him read:

"Geo. L. Muggs, the minstrel magnate, with his charming daughter, Miss Maizie Muggs, is a guest of the Mansion House. Mr. Muggs will give his Belascolike direction to the performance of the Megatharian Minstrels at the Park Theater to-night."

When the evening came Patsy blacked up for the performance, and he said to Mr. Wilkins, who besides discharging gracefully the duties of interlocutor had the onerous work of the stage management on his capable shoulders:

"Am I gonna sing to-night, Mr. Wilkins?"

"Yes, Harold," replied Mr. Wilkins, "and Miss Maizie 'll be in one of the private boxes to hear you. The boss's daughter's taken quite a shine to you. He told me to put you in the afterpiece too."

"What, in 'Down on de Ol' Plantation Befo' de Wah'?" said Patsy, immensely tickled.

"Yes, you are to go on as Aunt Dinah. You won't have any lines to speak, and all you'll have to do is to run around the stage, and let the rest soak you with bladders. It's a part rich in comedy, and you'll hog all the laughs."

Banks Gilgan was gargling his throat, and he vouchsafed the kindly advice:

"You want to take care of your pipes, kid. I preserve the silver-toned quality o' mine by usin' listerine."

Patsy's cup of happiness was full, and he rejoiced inwardly over his good fortune. But while he was putting on his celluloid collar Bill Bohee, with an evil look on his face, came to him, and snarled:

"Look here, you big hick, if ye know what's good fur ye, you'll leave that skirt alone!"

"If ye mean Miss Maizie Muggs," returned Patsy coldly, "she ain't no skirt. She's a satin dress with a train six yards long, an' I don't need the train to wipe up the dirt with ye!"

"Oh, you don't say so?" sneered Bill Bohee. "Say, fur two cents I'd pull yer nose!"

"You'd better wipe yer own!" retorted Patsy.

All danger of hostilities between the two was temporarily avoided by the call to assemble on the stage in readiness for the first part.

The curtain went up on only a fair audience, and Patsy was thrilled by the sight of Maizie, who leaned over the rail of one of the proscenium boxes, a ravishing vision in a low-cut gown.

All the stage-fright he had experienced when he utterly collapsed on his first appearance in his home town was gone, and he was as cool as a cucumber when with a flourish Mr. Wilkins made the announcement:

"Mr. Harold Evermond, America's leading tenor, will now oblige with the beautiful sentimental ballad, 'Girl o' Mine.'"

Advancing without the slightest trepidation to the footlights, and looking up at the furiously blushing Maizie, Patsy sang:

"Like the tender stars at night,
Girl o' mine,
How my lonely path you light,
Girl o' mine;
How you guide me ever on
Through the darkness to the dawn;
How I'd sigh if you were gone,
Girl o' mine!"

Tremendous applause greeted his vocal outburst, and Maizie clapped her white-gloved hands rapturously, but in the midst of his triumph a person whom Patsy in a flash recognized as one of the trio of his encounter at the railroad station rose and hurled something at him.

The aim was unerring, and the object broke in a bilious yellow all over Patsy's celluloid shirt-front, while from its terrible odor he realized it was an ancient nest-egg which no self-respecting hen would have sat upon.

Instantly the whole house was plunged into an indignant commotion.

Bump—bump—bumpety - bump—bump bump! sounded from above, and the big gallery bouncer shouted out:

"Ca'm yourselves, ladies an' gents! I got the creator o' the disturbance, an' I throwed him down the gallery stairs!"

CHAPTER IX.

LAKEVILLE'S RICHEST MAN.

PATSY with his egg-splattered celluloid shirt-front bowed to the continued applause of the audience, and then resumed his place beside the interlocutor, Mr. Wilkins, while the Bohee Brothers on the ends started their quick-fire talk.

It seemed to him that Bill Bohee was particularly vivacious in his quips and sallies, and the suspicion gradually fastened itself upon him that he might have been connected in some way with the mortifying incident that had just occurred.

"It was one of the most dastardly insults ever heaped upon art," remarked Mr. Wilkins to him, in a stage aside. "Shakespeare once said something about the man who has no music in his soul. I forget just what it was, but, believe me, kid, it was some roast!"

He punctuated his words with long-drawn, expressive "Pughs!" which caused Patsy to venture the opinion:

"I guess the hen that laid that egg must 'a' been pretty sick!"

The rest of the performance proceeded without further interruption, and, in "Down on de Ol' Plantation Befo' de Wah," Patsy scored an immense hit.

Attired in a calico wrapper and with a red cotton handkerchief on his head he kept running around the stage while all the other characters in the sparkling afterpiece kept whacking him with bladders and slap-sticks. Every time they whacked him he made the audience roar with laughter, and though he often involuntarily yelled out "Ouch!" he felt the divine thrill of the true artist.

Members of the troupe when they were getting off the cork at the close of the performance congratulated him heartily, and Roscoe Fothergill said, with great enthusiasm:

"Kid, you're a born comedian. You don't have to act like a fool to make the people laugh. All you have to do is to be natural. Why, your face itself is a scream!"

Patsy did not see Maizie after the show, for he was too busy helping Jones with the pack-up. When they met next morning at the railroad station she cried impulsively:

"Oh, Mr. Evermond, how lovely you were last night! Your voice is simply exquisite—neither a tenor nor a baritone—more, I should say, like a hybrid. As a singer John McCormack's got nothing on you. But when you took those high notes you ought to have been arrested."

"Did you like me as Aunt Dinah?" asked Patsy, much pleased by what she said.

"When they hit you with bladders," was Maizie's response, "you were too funny for anything. I just thought I'd die laughing."

"That son-of-a-gun, Bill Bohee, used a slap-stick on me," said Patsy, with a trace of bitterness in his tone. "I was thinkin' o' askin' yar father to change our parts."

The train rolled in, and Maizie said:

"Won't you share a seat with me?"

"No, Miss Maizie," was Patsy's sorrowful response. "I gotter blooch!"

"Blooch!" repeated Maizie. "Why, what do you mean?"

"One o' my duties with this here troupe," explained Patsy, "is to ride on trains free. I scrooch in under a seat at the feet o' Fothergill 'n' Gilgan, an' they hide me up with things so the conductor won't git wise to me. Mr. Gilgan puts his valise on me. I think he's got it loaded with pig-iron."

At Goobertown, the next stand they were to play, the prospects for a good house that night were far from encouraging, and Mr. Tooter, who conducted the Grand Theater there, summed up the whole situation bitterly and briefly.

"The movies," he said to Muggs, "has cut into my bus'ness sumpin' fierce. That dago Piccolini with his pitcher-house down the street is a gittin' all the cush. He's taken the old carriage-factory, put in a new tin-front, an' called it the Palace. To-day he's a runnin' a rank five-reeler, 'Shall We Tell Our Daughters'? The censor's forbid it, an' the Purity League's tried to injunct it, but the dago's beat 'em in the courts, an' he'll pack 'em in all day."

Muggs at once ordered out the parade, but it excited only a passing interest, and the performance that night was given to a handful of people.

"Goobertown ain't a cultured town," said Mr. Tooter disappointedly, as he pocketed his share of the receipts, $7.40. "If it wasn't fur my position in the overall-factory I'd have a hard time to exist. The people pass up the classy shows like yours, an' crowd to see the pitchers. I s'pose it's because most of 'em can't read 'n' write. Carnegie made the big mistake of his life when he give Goobertown a lib'ry. What he should 'a' done was to give it the merry ha-ha!"

Muggs had to dig down deep into his bank-roll to get the troupe to Lakeville, where it was booked on the day following, which was Saturday, for both a matinee and night performance. Here when Muggs and his company arrived the outlook appeared brighter, and the box-office treasurer, when questioned by the minstrel impresario, said:

"The advance 's pretty fair. The matinee maybe kinder light, but looks as if there 'd be a bumper house to-night. Saturday's a good day in Lakeville, an' the munition-plant's runnin' at full blast."

A limousine drove up to the opera-house just then, and the chauffeur brought it to a stop before the door.

"That's Mr. J. Herbert Smith's car," vouchsafed the admiring youth in the box-office. "Ain't it a jim-dandy? Mr. Smith's the richest man in Lakeville, an' takes in all the shows. If they was all like him there'd be S. R. O. every time one come to town."

A well-dressed man in the early forties, with a rugged, seamed, but kindly-looking face, got out of the car, and came toward the box-office. He had a most genial manner, yet somehow there was an air about him that told of one-time hard and bitter experiences.

"Hello, Jackson!" he greeted the treasurer, in a pleasant tone. "How's the sale?"

"Pretty good, Mr. Smith," said the youth, beaming at him through the window. "I s'pose you'll want your box to-night."

"Yes, of course," said Mr. Smith. "I was thinking too of inviting the children of the orphan asylum to the matinee. It would be quite a treat for all the little kids. Would you mind ringing up the matron, Jackson? Ask her if they can go."

"Surest thing you know, Mr. Smith," grinned the treasurer, and he got in touch with the asylum at once. "Yes, she says they'll all be there with bells on, an' she's ever 'n' ever so much obliged. Gallery seats, Mr. Smith?"

"No, orchestra," was the response. "Give 'em the best in the house. Let's see, Jackson, what's the damage?"

"There's sixty of the kids at fifty cents apiece," said the treasurer, "an' your box's ten dollars. That's forty dollars in all."

From a stuffed pocketbook Mr. Smith carelessly abstracted a fifty-dollar yellowback which he handed to Jackson.

"Keep the other ten dollars and buy some candy for the children," he instructed. "Give me the tickets for the box to-night, and I'll go."

As he passed out Jackson said to Muggs, who was a delighted listener:

"Ain't he a prince? If I had all the mazooma he's got I'd never do a lick o' work again. You just oughter see his place. It's the finest one in town."

Meanwhile Patsy and Jones were busily disposing of the company's trunks in the various dressing-rooms, and while at this task Patsy had the misfortune to let one of the trunks fall on his left hand.

The little finger on which he wore his ring was badly lacerated, and he jumped up and down in his pain, trying to still the expletives that rose to his lips.

"Gee! that's tough!" said the sympathetic Jones, as Patsy wrung his profusely bleeding finger. "You'd better find a doctor, kid, an' have him dress it at once."

"Where 'll I get one?" returned Patsy, wincing and writhing in torture.

"Go out to the front of the house an' ask," said Jones. "They'll be able to tell you there."

Muggs was still at the box-office when Patsy appeared with his injured finger.

"Why, yes, Dr. Thomas has an office in the next block," said Jackson, when Patsy stated his urgent need. Then the treasurer turned to Muggs with the further information: "He's the half-brother o' Mr. Smith, the man you just saw. I guess the doctor's in his office now. He ain't got much practice. The people dislike him as much as they like Mr. Smith."

Patsy hastened to the office of Dr. Thomas, who was a dark, sinister-faced man repellant in looks and manner.

"One of the minstrels, eh?" he said, in a rather harsh voice. "That's a bad finger you've got. You'd better take the ring off before the finger swells. I'll dress and bandage it at once."

Patsy removed the ring, suffering excrutiating pain as he did so. Then Dr. Thomas treated the bruised finger with an antiseptic.

The ring with its odd design lay on the

table, and it attracted the doctor's cold, fishy eye. He took it up and examined it carefully.

"That's a curious ring," he said, in his harsh, metallic voice. "Where did you get it?"

"That was my mother's," said Patsy, looking at the other with the inward feeling that upon closer acquaintance he would dislike him more and more. "There's somethin' on the inside of it."

Dr. Thomas thereupon examined the inside which bore the engraved inscription: "From John to Mary."

"Rather an unusual design," he said, staring at Patsy in a way that made the latter somewhat uncomfortable. "I've taken quite a fancy to the ring. Do you want to sell it?"

"No, mister, not fur any price," said Patsy firmly. "Ye see, it's all I got to remind me o' my mother. She died when I was born at the poor-farm over in Squantum."

"Ah, I see," said Dr. Thomas, and his thin lips curled in a well-defined sneer. "Your birth, then, is somewhat obscure. It is a matter perhaps you would rather not discuss."

"I don't exackly know what ye mean, mister," said Patsy, in a resentful tone, "but I do know that ev'rything was on the dead level, an' I got this here to prove it."

He took a well-thumbed document from his pocket as he spoke, wincing as his smarting finger came in contact with the lining of his coat.

"What's that?" asked Dr. Thomas, with interest.

"It's my mother's marriage certificate," said Patsy.

"Will you let me see it?" asked Dr. Thomas, with just a shade of eagerness. "Maybe I can be of some service to you."

Patsy handed him the paper, and the other opened it, and ran his eye over it. All the while his cold, hard face was expressionless.

"Have you ever made any effort to locate your father?" he finally asked.

"No," said Patsy.

"I don't suppose it would be of any use," said Dr. Thomas carelessly. "No doubt your father's dead too. Besides New York's a pretty big place. If you ever went there to try to find out anything it would be just like looking for a needle in a hay-stack."

"I guess yer right," said Patsy.

"You might as well destroy that certificate," advised Dr. Thomas, "and think no more about it."

"Not by a long shot!" was Patsy's quick ejaculation. "Some day this here paper may prove I'm a prince, or a duke, or somethin' like that with oodles o' boodle comin' to me. I've read in books things a good deal stranger 'n that!"

CHAPTER X.

THE MASTER OF LAKEVIEW.

AT the night performance Mr. J. Herbert Smith and his half-brother, Dr. Thomas, shared a private box, and the former seemed particularly well pleased with Patsy's rendition of the ballad, "Girl o' Mine," at the conclusion of which he led the applause of the big audience so energetically that Patsy was obliged to sing the refrain again, and still again.

When the curtain fell on the first part Mr. Smith rose from his chair, and made a remark to Dr. Thomas, who laid his hand on the other's arm, and at the same time said something apparently to dissuade him from his intention.

But the latter's words evidently had no effect, for Mr. Smith brushed aside the portières at the entrance of the box, and made his way alone quickly up the aisle out to the lobby.

Near the box-office Muggs was talking to the local manager, Mr. Simpson, and both were in exuberant spirits because business was good.

"Oh, howdy do, Mr. Smith?" was Mr. Simpson's cordial greeting. "Let me introduce you to Mr. Muggs, the proprietor of the Megatharians. Mr. Smith is one of our best patrons, Mr. Muggs."

"Glad to meet you, Mr. Muggs," said Mr. Smith, as they shook hands. "In fact, I came out to ask Mr. Simpson to introduce me."

"Say, that was a swell thing ye done fur those orphans at the matinee to-day," broke in Muggs enthusiastically.

"No, no, it's not worth mentioning," Mr. Smith hastily interjected. "What I wanted to say to you is this. I like show-people, Mr. Muggs. Most of them I've met are good-hearted and generous, with pockets ever open to the needy, and hands always outstretched to help a friend. When there's flood, fire, or famine, and benefits are planned, the actor is the first to volunteer his services. He gives his aid to the widow and orphan — yes, all in distress. Sometimes we make light of professional people, Mr. Muggs, but I rank them among our most valuable citizens."

"You've said a whole earful!" was the admiring comment of Muggs. "I wish Wilkins could 'a' heard ye."

"Wilkins!" repeated Mr. Smith. "I don't understand you."

"He'd 'a' copped it fur one o' his speeches," explained Muggs. "It 'd 'a' been a good thing fur one o' the Elks' banquets."

"When actors come to Lakeville," went on Mr. Smith, "they can always count on me to be among their patrons. I fully appreciate their efforts no matter how humble they are. I like to show them what hospitality I can, and send them away with good impressions of the town. To-morrow is Sunday, and no doubt you will all be here. If so I shall be glad to have your company as my guests at Lakeview."

"Go by all means, Muggs," urged Simpson heartily. "Mr. Smith here sure knows how to entertain. You'll have the time of your lives."

"Why, I dunno what to say off-hand, Mr. Smith," replied Muggs, "but I'll put it up to the boys. I'm pretty sure they'll all be delighted to go."

"Let me know before I leave to-night," said Mr. Smith, "and I'll have automobiles at the hotel for them to-morrow. Be sure to get that young man, Harold Evermond, to come. I was very much impressed with the way he sang 'Girl o' Mine.'"

Just then Maizie Muggs tripped daintily up, and Muggs said, with great pride:

"My daughter Maizie, Mr. Smith."

"I hope Miss Maizie, too, will honor me," said Mr. Smith, acknowledging the introduction. "The party would be incomplete without her."

He tipped his hat conscious of the bewitching smile Maizie bestowed upon him, and started back into the theater, while Muggs gazed after him with open admiration.

"He's the real goods, Maizie," was his emphatic comment.

"If he wasn't getting to be an antique, pa," was her response, "your beautiful child would make a dead set for him."

"Maybe," said Muggs thoughtfully, "I kin git him to back me in a big minstrel company to play only the week-stands."

The Megatharians to a unit accepted the invitation that had been extended to them, and word to that effect was carried to Mr. Smith in his box.

It was planned that at noon on the following day automobiles were to come to the hotel to take them to Mr. Smith's estate which was some distance from the town. Patsy was in his room putting the finishing touches to his toilet when he heard a knock on the door.

"Come in!" he cried, and the solitary bell-boy of the hostelry entered at his bidding.

"Dr. Thomas is down-stairs, an' wants to see you," he said.

"Tell him I'll be down in a minute," said Patsy, fastening his tie, and regarding himself with pardonable pride in the glass.

Dr. Thomas was waiting in the hotel office, where a number of the minstrels were congregated, when Patsy made his appearance. With an effort he tried to force a genial smile to his countenance as Patsy approached him.

"How's the finger, my young friend?" he asked.

"It don't smart as much as it did," was Patsy's response.

"My auto's just outside," said Dr. Thomas. "I'd be glad to have you take a spin with me up to Mount Kiscoe. The view from there is one you'll never forget. It's fine with the leaves just beginning to turn. We can have our dinner at the Mountain House."

"I'm sorry," said Patsy, "but I'm goin' with the rest o' the boys out to Mr. Smith's."

Dr. Thomas's face suddenly clouded with a frown.

"I thought we could both get away from them," he said, in a disappointed tone. "To be frank and honest with you, I detest actors, and I don't see how my half-brother can derive any pleasure from their society. You're the one exception—I've taken a strong liking to you.

"But actors as a class are good-for-nothing loafers and blackguards who don't fit in with this world of work. Some of them get big salaries for doing nothing of any value or consequence. They are shiftless and irresponsible, without any sense of right or wrong. In the olden days they were properly looked upon as strolling vagabonds, and were well satisfied in return for their poor antics to have a crust thrown at them just as if they were dogs."

This unflattering opinion of the profession was diametrically opposed to that of his kindly, well-disposed half-brother which, of course, Patsy had not heard.

"Gee! but you've got a grouch at actors!" he said, with a feeling of strong resentment at the other's foolish tirade. "You must be bilious or somethin'. You oughter take some o' yer pills fur it. If you should ask me, mister, I'd tell ye I think it's a mighty fine thing to try to make folks laugh an' forget their cares. No, sirree, I'm stuck on the stage an' actors, an' all I hope is I'll make good!"

Further discussion was cut short by the appearance of three big touring-cars before the hotel doors, and Patsy's companions began to hastily leave the office and tumble into them until they were uncomfortably crowded.

"Well," said Dr. Thomas regretfully, "since I can't induce you to come with me to Mount Kiscoe I might as well go back with you to Lakeview. There'll be more room in my car than in the others, so you'd better ride with me."

Muggs and Maizie were standing on the pavement somewhat puzzled to find places in the machines, and they too were invited by the doctor to ride in his car.

Through Lakeville's streets with their sober Sunday aspect the gay party speeded out into the open country for possibly a mile until they came to Mr. Smith's fine estate.

They passed through the massive stone pillars of the imposing gateway along a winding driveway of macadam as smooth as the cloth of a billiard-table, with velvet lawns, noble trees, beds of flowers, and clumps of rare shrubbery bordering the sides.

Fair glimpses of a smiling, dimpling lake some miles in extent formed an entrancing vision on the left, and jutting out into it was a wharf with a boat-house of graceful architectural design.

A flock of sheep was contentedly nibbling the tender grass of a great stretch of greensward, and in a sheltered hollow with a wind-break of poplars were a number of magnificent greenhouses.

The mansion with its many windows and broad piazzas shaded with awnings stood on a slight eminence, and commanded exquisite views from all sides.

"This is some place," remarked Muggs, inhaling the winelike air. "It's just the kind I'll have when I give up the minstrel bus'ness."

"I'm afraid it would be too poky for a steady diet, pa," objected Maizie. "I'd rather have you buy a house on Fifth Avenue, New York, so I can go to the midnight cabarets."

They came to a halt, and from all sides dogs of different breeds rushed out leaping, yelping, and barking a vociferous welcome.

Dr. Thomas got out of his machine, while some of the dogs jumped up against him, and it was plain that he was very much annoyed.

"Get out, you dirty brutes!" he snarled, and kicked out among them, landing on one that incontinently fled with sharp, agonized yelps. "If I had my way I'd drown the whole bunch of you!"

Out of the spacious hallway of the house, with its wide open doors, came Mr. Smith, his face smiling, his whole manner one of unaffected cordiality and hospitality. The dogs ran to him, leaped up and bounded against him in a delirium of canine delight, and here and there he bestowed where he could an affectionate pat.

"Miss Maizie and gentlemen," he said, "welcome to Lakeview!"

CHAPTER XI.

GOLD—GOLD—GOLD!

MUGGS introduced the members of his troupe in quick succession to their host, and when it came Patsy's turn to be presented he said:

"This is Harold Evermond, the young man who sang 'Girl o' Mine.'"

"That was the song I particularly liked," said Mr. Smith, as he gave Patsy's hand a warm pressure. Then as he looked at his face he started perceptibly.

"Come with me into the house, Mr. Evermond," hastily added Dr. Thomas, who stood at Patsy's side. "I'd like to show you some of my brother's pictures. He's got a very fine collection."

"Yes, yes, you must see them, by all means," said Mr. Smith, and as the somewhat reluctant Patsy was led away by Dr. Thomas a puzzled look came into Mr. Smith's face.

"Strange," he said to Muggs, "but that young man reminded me of some one I once knew. The resemblance for a moment startled me."

On a wide veranda overlooking the lake Japanese servants were busily employed in preparing a long table for dinner, and the array of snowy linen, shining silver, and glittering cut-glass looked most inviting. The small brown men moved noiselessly about intent upon their work, arranging a profusion of flowers in vases, with a bunch of long-stemmed Jacqueminots at the right of the chair at the head of the table.

"I thought it would be pleasanter to eat out on the porch," said Mr. Smith to Muggs. "The air is quite summery to-day. Afterward you can all do as you wish. There are billiards, tennis, cards, and other things to while the time away, or you can go out on the lake if you like. And now, gentlemen, let's go into the house."

He led the way into the stately mansion which was a marvel of taste and refinement with its hand-carved furniture, antique rugs, and paintings by old masters that represented a fortune in themselves.

Not only on the dining-room buffet but on various stands scattered conveniently about were decanters of spirits, cigars, and cigarettes in plentiful supply.

"Enjoy yourselves, gentlemen," urged Mr. Smith. "It will give me great pleasure to see you make yourselves at ease."

While they were examining the art-treasures that made the house a veritable museum the Japanese butler sounded a gong out in the hall.

"Ah, that means dinner," said Mr. Smith, consulting his watch. "Sakki is prompt to the second. They make invaluable servants, these Japs."

"Yes," agreed Muggs, "an' they're rattlin' good jugglers."

At the table Mr. Smith seated Maizie at his right, and handed her the roses with a graceful compliment. He motioned Muggs to take the chair at his left.

"And now," he said to the others, "I shall usurp the duties of your interlocutor, Mr. Wilkins. Gentlemen, be seated!"

There was a general laugh at this reference to the well-known first-part expression, and they all settled into places at the table.

Patsy and Dr. Thomas were standing near its foot, through the evident design of the latter, whose intention seemed to be to keep his young companion as far removed from Mr. Smith as possible.

"Sit here beside me," he urged, and Patsy took the chair next to him.

The Japanese servants passed dexterously along the lines of guests, filling their glasses with champagne.

"This is just like home!" said Banks Gilgan to Roscoe Fothergill over the soup.

The dinner, a most excellent one, was served in faultless style, and when they were drinking their demi-tasses of black coffee, and the men were smoking their fragrant perfectos, Maizie remarked to Mr. Smith, with a little envious sigh:

"It must be fine to be born with a golden spoon in your mouth."

" I was not born rich, Miss Maizie," was his response. " Up to the time I was a young man I was in very poor circumstances."

" Did you make all your money?" she asked, in surprise.

" It was made for me," he said. " All that I have I owe to my faith in mankind."

" How so?" she questioned.

" It's a rather long story," he said hesitatingly, " and perhaps it would only bore you."

" No, indeed," she said, with eagerness. " I should like to hear it."

Muggs and others near by made a perfect clamor with their requests, and Mr. Smith, with a long pull at his cigar, good-naturedly began:

" My father died when I was a baby, and when I was two years old my mother married again. Dr. Thomas, my half-brother here, is the result of that second union. Both of my mother's husbands were poor men, and we all had quite a struggle to get along."

Dr. Thomas at the foot of the table looked annoyed, but, oblivious of the fact, Mr. Smith went on:

" I was brought up to work, but before I could be of any real assistance to my mother she died. I had long wanted to go to New York. After I lost my mother there was nothing to keep me, so I put my fortunes to the test, and was soon swallowed up in the great city.

" I got along fairly well, and with much economy saved some money. And among those I ran across in a city that swarms with queer characters, if one knows where to look for them, was one nicknamed Grub-Stake Bill to whom I took a great fancy, and who became equally attached to me.

" This Grub-Stake Bill was an old mining prospector who had always been in chase of the pot of gold at the rainbow's end. He had been in almost every locality where the discovery of gold had created a riffle. He had dug in the earth, and panned gravel, but the precious ore he sought had always mockingly eluded him.

" What had brought him to New York I don't know, for he was completely obsessed with the one thought of finding gold. He belonged to the West, and was like a fish out of water. It might have been a thought that he could find backing for one of his wild schemes had led him back to so-called civilization where he had stranded. When I came upon him he was almost a human derelict, a thing in rags and tatters.

" I clothed him, and many a time staked him to a meal and lodging, and the old man would continually whine:

" ' Grub-stake me, boy, an' I'll make ye rich! Git yer money in a lump—don't fool yer time away on nickels! There's plenty o' gold still hidden away fur ye in the earth. Grub-stake me, boy, an' I'll find it fur ye!'

" When the papers were full of stories of rich finds of gold in the Klondike the old fellow went nearly out of his head, and he got me almost crazy, too.

" ' Let's pull up stakes an' hike fur Alaska,' Grub-Stake Bill frantically kept imploring me. ' The gold's there, boy, an' this time I gotter hunch I'll find it. Don't fritter away yer time on nickels when the yaller stuff's a waitin' fur ye there in gobs. You come with me, boy, an' I'll make ye rich!'

" There was something in which I was vitally interested just then that prevented my leaving New York. If it had not been for this I would probably have gone with the old fellow. The end of it was, I grub-staked him—that is, I gave him money enough to get to the Klondike and buy an outfit.

" Well, thought I, when I speeded the delighted old fellow on his way, a fool and his money are soon parted, and this conviction strengthened as time went on, and I never heard from him. Weeks, months, a year rolled on, and I had charged the money to profit and loss, when one day I was suddenly electrified by news from Grub-Stake Bill.

" It came in the shape of a letter written in the heart of the Klondike, and brought by carriers to Dyea, where the government had done the rest.

" What I read was almost unbelievable, and the ill-spelt words crudely set down in pencil seemed like the raving of a lunatic. According to the old man's statement he had discovered almost at the outset a gold claim of fabulous riches which he had first staked out and duly protected by title so that no one could take it from him. There he had built a shack, and was storing up gold without any effort from an apparently inexhaustible supply.

"He urged me to join him at once, and said there was more than enough to make us both millionaires. In the letter were explicit directions how he could be reached after the steamer had landed me on the Dyea beach. He had been snowed in all winter, so that it had been impossible to get me word before, but with the spring thaw travel in the Yukon country would not be so difficult.

"If the old man was to be believed, here was the opportunity to end what might prove to be a lifetime of struggling for a mere existence, and instantly I resolved to take the chance that had been thrown in my way.

"It meant the temporary parting from one who had grown very dear to me, but it also meant affluence and luxury for us both the rest of our lives. I converted all I had into ready cash, intrusted my affairs to the hands of my half-brother here, Dr. Thomas, and without any loss of time boarded a train for Seattle.

"Of the hardships of that journey after I was landed on the beach at Dyea I do not care to speak. Their memory even now brings shudders. But I had ample money for my needs, and spent it liberally on an outfit, with plentiful supplies of flour, bacon, canned goods, and other provisions, which the Indian guides I hired loaded on their backs. I did not know to what extremities Grub-Stake Bill might be reduced, and I resolved to be fully fortified against all circumstances.

"Toward the Arctic circle we set our noses, up the raging Dyea River which with the spring thaw had become a devastating flood from the fast-melting ice piled on mountains and in gorges. We crossed the dreaded Chilkoot Pass, and plunged in a canoe from one lake to another, on a trip so hazardous, so full of thrills and danger, that for all the money in the world I would not attempt it again.

"So interminably long it was, so heart and spirit breaking, I groaned and ached with the thought it would continue on forever, but in all my despair I was assured by my stolid guides that we were nearing our journey's end.

"At last we spied a rough, tumbledown log shack near a creek, and here, I was told, was our destination.

"But there was no sign of life about the shack, and it seemed to be deserted. We called out again and again, and there came no response.

"A terrible feeling possessed me that I had come on a wild-goose chase or else was too late."

CHAPTER XII.

BY ACCIDENT OR DESIGN?

MR. SMITH paused to take a deep breath. It was evident from the catch that suddenly came into his voice that what he still had to relate affected him.

His interested listeners said never a word but watched him intently as he relit his cigar, which had gone out.

"We pushed in the door," he finally went on, "and there in a corner on a rude, improvised pallet heaped with the furs and skins of wild animals was a gaunt, emaciated figure that I had great difficulty in recognizing as Grub-Stake Bill.

"He fastened a pair of wild eyes sunk in the cavernous depths above his pallid cheeks on us, and just the suggestion of a smile came to his bloodless lips.

"'So it's you, boy, at last!' he greeted me. 'I knowed you'd come!'

"I saw the man was dying of hunger, and without wasting any time prepared some of the cubes of beef tea I had brought, and forced the hot, strengthening fluid down his starved lips. He ate like a famished beast, smacking his lips again and again, and I gave him solids.

"'I told ye so!' he raved, between his eager gulps of food. 'I had a hunch this time I'd find it. We're rich, boy—both rich—an' no one kin take it away from us! I got the title pertected by law. Them New York millionaires ain't got nothin' on us.'

"I looked down startled at him, for there was something uncanny about his dirty, unshaved face with its snarled, matted, long-uncombed thatch of hair that told more strongly than words of his fast-approaching end.

"'Good heavens, man!' I involuntarily cried. 'You're dying! Think of the price you've paid!'

"'Yes,' was the chuckled response, 'an' I'm willin' to pay it ag'in. I know I'm dyin', but I sha'n't die a pauper. I'll die rich—rich! My dream's come true, boy—yes, more 'n true! I didn't think I could hold out till ye got here, but I've looked out fur yer. I ain't got kith or kin, an' it's all yourn. Under my head there's a paper I drawed up that gives it all to yer. What gold I've took out I've cached. Bend yer head down, an' I'll tell ye where.'

"I lowered my head, and he whispered in my ear the information. I had brought with me a few simple remedies, and I instantly set about to apply them.

"Spurred by my promise of rich reward the guides consented to remain, and for a brief breathing spell I went outside. Near the shack I pulled up some moss by the roots, shook it, and the dull yellow nuggets crusted to it fell in a shower to the ground. The place, as Grub-Stake Bill had averred, was a veritable El Dorado.

"Well, the old man passed into the great beyond that very night, and I was truly, genuinely sorry. After we had buried him I took the papers, one a legal claim to the mine, the other his will duly signed and witnessed making me his sole heir. and with as few provisions as possible and as much gold as we could carry we hit the trail for Dawson.

"All the while I anticipated treachery from the Indian guides, knowing full well the desperate feelings the lust for gold sometimes creates in men's hearts, but whatever their thoughts may have been they maintained a perfectly stolid indifference, and were faithful and honest to the end. And let me say right here that their loyalty was not forgotten, for I made them rich enough to pass the remainder of their days in comparative comfort.

"At Dawson I fell in with a party of English mining promoters with unlimited capital, and after the extraordinary merits of the claim were fully proven to them I turned it over to them for five million dollars. Yes, and I understand they cleared a cool five millions more.

"Then came the long, tedious return to the East where a great, most unexpected blow awaited me. Gentlemen, there are some things that all the money in the world cannot buy, and love is one of them. What money can requite you for the loss of one who is all the world to you?"

He rose to suppress his inward emotion, ending his narrative rather abruptly, and leaving them all still curious. But one and all intuitively felt that it would have been an impertinence to voice the question at the tip of their tongues, so no one spoke for fear of opening some great wound.

The long silence that ensued was finally broken by Muggs.

"That's a mighty interestin' story," was his comment, while his eyes on all sides were confronted by the tangible evidence of its truth. "After this I'll always come across whenever I git a touch from the old bum!"

"Brother," said Dr. Thomas rather agitatedly, "I'm afraid we're lingering too long at the table. The guests want to enjoy themselves."

"Very true, Arthur," said Mr. Smith, and we must do all we can to make their brief stay with us as pleasant as possible. Come, gentlemen, state your wishes, and we'll endeavor to meet them. Take your choice—automobiles, boats, or games—whatever you like—go the limit—and, above all, make yourselves at home."

The entire party rose from the table, and in a short time were engaged in various sports and diversions, while their kind host went from one to another in his solicitude for their comfort.

Muggs had attached himself to Mr. Smith, probably with mercenary motives in his mind, and Patsy noticed with jealous qualms that Maizie was engaged in a vivacious chat with Bill Bohee.

"Let's go out on the lake," said an ingratiating voice at his elbow, and turning, he saw Dr. Thomas.

Patsy was just on the point of curtly refusing the proposal when he overheard Maizie say to Bohee:

"Oh, yes, Bill, it will be lovely out on the lake. Only, if we go, you must do all the rowing."

Patsy's jealousy increased as Bohee clutched Mamie's plump little hand and they ran off laughing in the direction of the wharf.

His scowling face reflected his inward feelings to such an extent that Dr. Thomas was prompted to remark sarcastically:

"Goes against the grain, eh? What's he trying to do? Take your girl away from you?"

"She ain't my girl," said Patsy coldly, "and she's got a right to do as she pleases. Only she might show better taste than to go with that feller. He thinks he's a honey boy, but he ain't even glucose."

They followed after the other two, and came upon Mr. Smith with Muggs. Once again Patsy's kind host started involuntarily as he saw him, and he stopped to say:

"My boy, I've been talking to Mr. Muggs about you. He tells me you've just joined his minstrels."

"I've been out with the boys about a week," was Patsy's response.

"I'd like you to tell me more about yourself," said Mr. Smith. "I've taken a great fancy to you. We must have a good long talk."

"We're going out on the lake," Dr. Thomas said hastily.

"Yes, yes. I see," said Mr. Smith. "Well, have a good time. I'm sorry the launch is out of repair or you could use it. You're going out for a row, I suppose."

"Yes," said Dr. Thomas. "Hurry up, Evermond."

Maizie and Bill Bohee had disappeared behind the trees and shrubbery that screened the turn of the driveway, but after Patsy and Dr. Thomas began to walk off, while Mr. Smith stood looking after them, his half-brother showed no particular haste, and slowed down in his gait.

At the tennis-courts the doctor stopped for some time to banter the perspiring contestants, and Patsy chafed at the delay.

"Oh, come on," he growled impatiently. "What are we stoppin' here fur?"

When they finally reached the wharf Maizie and Bill Bohee were nowhere in sight, though Patsy anxiously scanned the waters in all directions for them. Not far out was a small island which might have hid them from view.

Dr. Thomas inspected the flotilla of small craft tied to the wharf, and announced:

"The canoe's gone, so I guess they're out somewhere. Can you swim?"

"Not a stroke," said Patsy.

"You should learn," said Dr. Thomas, as he threw a pair of oars in a boat. "Every one should learn to swim. Get in the stern, and I'll row."

Patsy did as he was directed, and his companion began pulling away at the oars. He rowed out toward the island.

"There's one thing I wanted to ask you," said Patsy, trailing his right hand in the water. "Who was that person Mr. Smith spoke of just at the end o' his story? I'm kinder curious. Was it a woman?"

"No," said Dr. Thomas glibly, "it was a man."

"Oh," said Patsy. "From the way he spoke I thought it might 'a' been his wife."

"No," said Dr. Thomas. "My half-brother was never married."

Neither said anything further for some time, and Dr. Thomas put more force into his stroke. The boat was carried past the island, which had thick shrubbery and trees upon it, but though Patsy kept a sharp lookout he could discover no trace of Maizie and Bohee.

"My half-brother is a peculiar man," spoke Dr. Thomas at last. "He said something about wanting to have a talk with you. If he does talk to you my advice to you is not to mention anything about that ring and marriage certificate you have."

"Why?" asked Patsy, in surprise.

"Well, since he got his millions," said Dr. Thomas, with some hesitation, "he's been all stuck-up about society. He has no use for any one who isn't a blue-blood. He seems to have taken quite a fancy to you, but he'd drop you like a hot potato the moment he knew you came from a poor-farm."

"That's funny," said Patsy thoughtfully. "He don't seem like that kind of a man."

Suddenly with the island some distance astern of them a piercing scream rent the air. Patsy turned, and, with his back to Dr. Thomas, stood up, looking behind him to see what was the cause.

Almost at the same instant Dr. Thomas, without any warning, shifted his whole weight to one side of the boat, and Patsy nearly went over into the water. Only by his great dexterity did he recover his balance, toppling in a heap into the stern of the boat.

"What are you tryin' to do?" he said angrily. "Stop rockin' the boat!"

"Excuse me!" said Dr. Thomas, almost meekly. "I didn't mean to. You almost fell in, didn't you? Well, I can swim like a duck, and I'd have had you out in a jiffy."

Maizie had run down to the water's edge of the island, and was still screaming in her excitement, while Bill Bohee was trying to calm her.

"Row fur the island as quick as you kin!" urged Patsy, fearing that some great calamity had befallen her. "It may be life or death. If that big slob's been gittin' gay I'll wipe the earth up with him."

His companion bent to the oars, and soon they were grounded on the beach. Maizie ran toward them, and Patsy faced her, prepared to hear the worst.

"There's snakes on the island!" she tragically announced.

"Aw, wot's eatin' ye?" said Bill Bohee disgustedly. "I killed the snake, didn't I?"

"I won't stay here another single second," said the emotional Maizie, with a shudder. "Think of a big boa-constrictor winding its terrible coils around you and choking you to death!"

Raising her skirts daintily she got into the boat, leaving Bill Bohee to paddle back in the canoe alone. All the while they were returning to the wharf she stared at Dr. Thomas curiously until he was much embarrassed by her gaze.

Mr. Smith prevailed upon all to remain for supper, afterward sending them back to the hotel in automobiles. But the opportunity for a talk with Patsy somehow did not present itself, and he bade him good-by with a warm, friendly pressure of his hand.

Maizie and Patsy rode back together, but he was surly, and said never a word. When they were getting out at the hotel-entrance she turned to him and spoke for the first time.

"I think," were her words, "you're awfully mean to treat me so."

"How about the way you've treated me?" asked Patsy stiffly.

"Why, what do you mean?"

"Why did you go to that island with Bill Bohee?"

"When Mr. Bohee landed me there against my will," said Maizie, "he had the effrontery to propose to me again, and I gave him the rinky-dink!"

"You did!" said the overjoyed Patsy. "Shall I give him the razzamataz, with the accent on the taz?"

"Not with your sore finger," said Maizie. "You might hurt it, and I would not have that happen for all the world. Harold—may I call you Harold?"

"No, don't call me Harold," said Patsy. "That's my professional name, an' it sounds kinder sissy. Call me Patsy if you like."

"Well, Patsy, then," said Maizie, "come with me as far as my room. There's something I want to ask you."

They went by the ladies' entrance up the dingy stairs, and in the hallway above, with her hand upon the knob of the door of her room, Maizie turned to him, and abruptly asked:

"Patsy, how long have you known Dr. Thomas?"

"Why, yesterday was the first day I ever met him in my life."

"He must have a grudge against you," said Maizie decidedly.

"What makes you say that?" asked Patsy, puzzled.

"I was watching you from the island," said Maizie, "when you stood up in the boat. He purposely swerved to one side to make you lose your balance, and fall into the water. Patsy, he's got designs upon your life!"

CHAPTER XIII.

FROM CRYSALIS TO BUTTERFLY.

PATSY tossed restlessly in his bed that night with his sleep disturbed by the thought of Maizie's words. But the more he thought the less foundation they seemed to have.

His brief acquaintance with Maizie had shown him that she was very imaginative, to say the least. What motive could a man whom he hardly knew have for trying to get him out of the way? What would he have to gain even if he accomplished such a dastardly purpose?

Maizie's suspicions seemed so groundless that he finally dismissed them from his drowsy mind, turned over on his pillow, and went to sleep. His last comforting thought was that, even if there were a grain of truth in what she had said, each day would find him further away from Dr. Thomas if the latter really meant to do him harm.

The minstrels were to take their departure from Lakeville at an early hour the next morning, but long before the time left by Patsy with the hotel clerk for a call, he was rudely wakened from slumber by a knock on his door.

Rubbing his eyes to get the sleep out of them, he sprang from bed, went to the door, and opened it.

"Some one down in the office wants to see yer," said the bell-boy, between his yawns.

Instantly Patsy's thoughts reverted to Dr. Thomas, and he wondered rather uneasily if this early visitor were he.

"Tell him I'll be down in a few minutes," he instructed, and the sleepy youth shambled off on his errand.

He hastily washed and got into his clothes, and went down to the hotel office fully expecting to meet Dr. Thomas.

But instead of that personage he was confronted by a Japanese whom he recognized as Mr. Smith's butler.

"Me Sakki," he briefly introduced himself. "Honorable master he tell me give you this."

As he spoke he handed to Patsy a small box and a letter, bowed low, and walked decorously away. Opening the letter Patsy read:

> Lakeview, September 12.
>
> MY DEAR BOY:
>
> I am sending you by bearer a little token of remembrance. The watch and chain I hope you will always wear. Upon the chain is one of the nuggets I took from the Klondike. I hope it will bring good luck to you. The theatrical business is an uncertain one, to say the least, so the other enclosure may some time prove useful to you. If you are ever in trouble, and need a friend, I hope you will call on me. When your season with the minstrels is over, I want you to come to Lakeview and make me a good long visit.
>
> With best wishes, I am,
>
> Yours sincerely,
>
> J. HERBERT SMITH.

Patsy opened the box, and besides the watch and chain referred to there were two crisp, new, one-hundred-dollar bills.

"He's a prince, an' no mistake!" was his admiring comment.

He promptly adorned his person with the watch and chain, and throughout breakfast ascertained the exact time at frequent intervals.

When his meal was finished he got his valise and departed from the hostelry. There was still an hour before train-time, so that he had ample opportunity to effect certain sartorial changes that his sudden rise to affluence made possible.

At the leading establishment of the town Patsy made reckless inroads upon his wealth by the purchase of a swagger suit of college clothes, a sport coat, patent-leather shoes and spats, a plug hat, and a light Malacca cane. He also bought a particularly up-to-the-minute Gladstone bag that had very strongly appealed to his fancy.

This joyous raiment he donned at once, transforming himself from a plain grub into a gorgeous butterfly. He changed his belongings from his somewhat dilapidated valise to the natty Gladstone, discarding the former entirely.

"Must be purty soft in the minstrel bus'ness," said the clerk enviously, when he was handed one of the one hundred-dollar bills.

"It is soft," acknowledged Patsy, as he surveyed himself with great satisfaction in a full-length glass, "only you gotter deliver the goods."

At the railroad station Muggs and Maizie were already waiting on the platform and when Patsy dawned upon them like a glorious sunrise he noted with a thrill that was ample recompense for all his lavish expenditure that they were stupefied with astonishment.

"He must 'a' succeeded where I failed," thought Muggs gloomily.

"Oh, Patsy," cried Maizie rapturously, "how swell you look! You must ride in the same seat with me. Why, I'll be the envy of every girl in the car!"

"No, Maizie," said Patsy despondently, "I'm afraid I gotter blooch. Honest to goodness, when I lie at the feet o' Roscoe Fothergill an' Banks Gilgan I feel just like a dog!"

"Pa," said Maizie, turning indignantly toward Muggs, "I think it's perfectly ignoble that such a splendid character as Mr. Evermond has got to blooch!"

"Daughter," said Muggs, in a firm tone, "I hold a party-ticket fur twenty, an' since you've come, there's twenty-four in the bunch. Four's gotter blooch."

When the train was on its way to Grimsby, where the troupe was booked to appear next, Patsy successfully discharged his delicate duty, and afterward proudly ran the gamut of his admiring colleagues to the car in which Maizie was seated.

As he entered he created a veritable sensation, and she quickly arranged her belongings so that he might occupy a place beside her.

The conductor on returning down the aisle had no distinct memory of having previously encountered this bird of brilliant plumage, so he stopped to hazard the interrogation:

"Tickets?"

"Company!" said Patsy haughtily, and the official gave him the high-sign, and continued on his way.

Forward in the smoker the Bohee brothers were intensely interested in a thin paper pamphlet whose green cover was decorated with human lungs, heart, liver, and kidneys, and Muggs, lighting a cigar in the seat behind them, leaned over to ask: "What ye got there, boys?"

"It's the biggest find we ever made, boss," was Bill Bohee's exulting response. "We ran across it in the last town. It's a Bunk Bitters almanac fur the year 1862. Why, the stuff in it's so old it's all new."

"We'll spring some o' the jokes tonight, bo," said his brother, Gus. "We'll tear their pants off!"

"No, you won't," said Muggs curtly. "Nothin' goes in the show I don't give my O. K. on. I don't want no gags you can't tell to a lady audience."

"Just listen to this, boss," said Bill Bohee, reading from the almanac. "'Why is a race-horse like a stick o' candy? Because the more you lick it the faster it goes!'"

"That's sure-fire," said Gus Bohee. "Tell him that other one, Bill. It's a scream."

"'A lady went in a music-store,'" read Bill, "'and says, 'I want that song called 'The Three Tramps.' 'Never heard of it,' says the clerk. 'Sing it.' 'All right,' says the lady, an' she ups and sings 'Tramp, tramp, tramp, the boys are marchin'!'"

"Immense!" cried Gus Bohee. "We'll twist it around an' use it. Spring another."

"'If a war broke out,'" went on Bill obligingly, "'who'd be the first to enlist?' 'Actors an' convicts.' 'Why?' 'Stars an' stripes!'"

"I don't git it," said Muggs, with his brow knitted in deep thought.

"You don't!" echoed Bill pityingly. "Stars—actors! Stripes—convicts! See?"

"Cut that out!" said Muggs decisively. "It would go over the heads of the plain people. It's only good fur highbrows."

"Me an' Bill's always studyin' to improve our act, boss," volunteered Gus Bohee. We got offers from the vaudeville people fur the big time, but we're kinder leary o' two shows a day. When are ya gonna come across with that raise?"

"Excuse me!" said Muggs, rising abruptly. "I wanta speak to Banks Gilgan."

At Grimsby, where they were to play Pettigrew's Opera House, Mr. Pettigrew, who also conducted the transfer business, was waiting at the station with a scene-truck and trailer.

He and Muggs were old acquaintances, and after they had greeted each other the local manager remarked:

"Bus'ness is sumpin' terrible. There ain't no money fur the house or shows. If it wasn't fur gettin' the hauls I wouldn't book a show in. I oughtn't 'a' give ye a return date, Muggs. Yer performance was rotten, an' made a bad impression."

"I've strengthened it," said Muggs. "I've got the phenomenal Harold Evermond at a fabulous salary."

"Well, all I know is," said Mr. Pettigrew acidly, "only one sucker's bit since we opened the advance, an' she's old Mrs. Griggs whose folks last summer wanted to put her in the sanitarium."

"Well," said Muggs encouragingly, "we'll just start the boys out on the parade, an' things 'll buzz."

When Muggs with Maizie arrived at Goop's hotel where accommodations had been arranged for the troupe by the indefatigable agent Sniper, he found another old acquaintance in the person of the worthy landlord, Mr. Goop.

"I've been a waiting fur ye," said that long, lean, hungry-looking individual, with a wistful smile. "Yes, I've been sorter hankerin' fur this visit ever since I seen yer bills stuck up in all the winders."

He pulled with a sucking sound a pen from a potato on the counter, and politely tendered it to Muggs.

"Ah, yes," said the latter, with a pleasant smile inspired by a vivid recollection of the $14.75 he had won at poker from his genial host on his previous sojourn. "My daughter, Miss Maizie Muggs."

"Pleased to meet ye, miss," said Mr. Goop, and he turned to Muggs who was registering. "The house has been completely renovated since you was here," he went on. "There's new furniture, an' beddin', an' everything, an' I'm thinkin' o' puttin' in a cabaret. Front, show this young lady up to twenty-three."

Maizie departed in the wake of a shock-headed youth, and from a glass case at the end of the counter Mr. Goop carefully selected a box of choice Pride of the Gutter cigars.

"Have one on the house!" he said hospitably to Muggs.

A short, thick-set man seated in a chair in neighborly proximity to a friendly square wooden sand-filled cuspidor rose with the assistance of a cane, and limping slightly came toward them. His shifty eyes had a cast in them, and though he was scrutinizing Muggs sharply he seemed to be watching the sheet-iron stove.

"Gents," said Mr. Goop, "permit me to introduce ye. Mr. Muggs, Mr. Doodle! Mr. Doodle, Mr. Muggs! Mr. Doodle's int'rested in the development of our town. An' now, if you'll go with me to the bar, we'll all have a snifter to our better acquaintance!"

CHAPTER XIV.

"THAT'S GOOD!" SAID MR. MUGGS.

WHEN the trio entered the hotel bar Mr. Banks Gilgan, with his legs gracefully crossed, was firmly propping up the polished counter, and just as he had made known his wishes he turned and noticed his employer.

In his advertisements in the dramatic papers for minstrel talent the impresario always laid particular stress upon the fact that "lushers, booze-fighters, and mashers" we tabu, and this printed statement was thoroughly familiar to Mr. Gilgan.

"High ball, I think you said," the barkeeper remarked to him.

"You've got another think coming," returned Mr. Gilgan. "I distinctly said sassafarilla!"

While he was painfully consuming a liquid foreign to his diaphragm the new arrivals lubricated their interiors with a superior quality of fusel oil, and Muggs set off one match after another in a desperate attempt to light his Pride of the Gutter cigar.

"Well, Muggs," said the genial Mr. Goop, wiping his chin-whiskers with the solitary towel that hung limply from the counter, "the pasteboards is a waitin'. Shall we dally with 'em? I don't see what's the matter with that there cigar. Gin'rally them Prides burns free, with a good gray ash, an' no clinkers."

"I s'pose you want your revenge, eh?" said Muggs. "I trimmed you last time good an' plenty, didn't I?"

"I guess ye kin trim me ag'in," said Mr. Goop good-naturedly. "It's the love o' the game makes me tackle it. What I make or lose cuts no figger. Gin'rally I lose, but it's all in a lifetime. We kin be alone an' have a nice little sociable time all by ourselves up in twenty-two. Mebbe our good friend Doodle here'll j'ine us."

"What are you gents talkin' about?" asked Mr. Doodle, cocking his eye at him but apparently centering it on the cash-register.

"Why, poker, o' course," said Mr. Goop. "Will ye sit in, Doodle?"

"It's been a long time since I drawed a card," said Mr. Doodle ruminatively, "an' I don't believe I'd know a straight from a flush. My mind's been all took up lately with parks an' other public improvements. But if I kin help you two gents out I'll take a hand."

The three moved off, Muggs and Goop with alacrity, Doodle limping after them on his cane, and, as the door swung to behind them, the barkeeper pityingly remarked:

"There goes another lamb to the slaughter!"

"What do you mean?" asked Banks Gilgan.

"Why, that's Cock-Eye Doodle, an' whenever he meets any one it's a case o' do! He's a short-card gam, an' you bet he knows the value of an ace. Every time he comes across one he holds it out fur future reference. Believe me, he's made some killin's in this burg, an' the boss is in cahoots with him—fifty-fifty—with drummers, an' actors is their specialty. They got a code o' signals, an' when a sucker's stacked up ag'in 'em, good night, nurse!"

"Gimme a wetter," said Mr. Gilgan.

"Sassafarilla?" asked the barkeeper.

"Highball!" said Mr. Gilgan.

When they were passing the room to which Maizie had been assigned Muggs rapped on the door, and, as she opened it and looked out, he said:

"Daughter, don't wait fur me fur dinner. I may be engaged in a bus'ness conference."

Maizie went back to the task of manicuring her finger-nails, and for the next few hours heard the confused murmur of voices in the adjoining room, while at frequent intervals she recognized her father's tones in the stereotyped expression:

"That's good!"

"When it comes to driving a bargain pa's there," thought Maizie. "Whatever the nature of the business is he seems to be getting the best of it."

The Megatharians went upon parade, passing Goop's hotel with a blare of brass, and she went to the window and blew indiscriminate kisses to them. As one man the marching minstrels paid her the pretty compliment of doffing their delicate pearl high hats to her, and she fairly beamed with pleasure.

But so interested was her father just then in a praiseworthy effort to try to help two little deserving deuces that he paid no attention to the lusty-lunged brass band, and the blue notes they emitted escaped his critical notice.

At dinner Maizie sat alone, and when Patsy entered the dining-room she motioned to him to join her.

"Where's your father?" he asked, as he took a seat beside her.

"Pa's engaged in an important business conference in the next room to mine," she explained. "It must be something immensely to his financial advantage for every once in a while I could hear him say 'That's good!'"

"When he said it, Maizie," anxiously interrogated Patsy, "did he smack his lips, an' show that he was tickled?"

"No," she responded.

"Did ye hear the click o' anything?"

"Why, yes, I did hear a click, but I don't know what it was."

"Maizie," spoke Patsy, with genuine regret, "when yer father was sayin' 'That's good!' I'm afraid in his heart he was a sayin' 'That's bad!' The clickin' sound ya heard was made by red, white, an' blue chips, an' yer pa must 'a' been shovin' 'em across the table to beat the band!"

So interested were the occupants of room No. 22 in the business conference referred to that they entirely forgot the elaborate course dinner daily provided by Mr. Goop, though that hospitable gentleman as the afternoon wore on thoughtfully rang for Swiss cheese sandwiches to revive their fainting spirits.

"Have ya noticed," said the observing Muggs, "that the holes in Swiss cheese has got bigger since the high cost o' livin'? But that's extraneous to our bus'ness. We're a pikin'. Let's get some quick action. Make it straight jack-pots, gents, with an iron man to ante, an' the sky the limit."

He looked fondly at the three kings among five cards Mr. Doodle had just dealt him, for he knew of the havoc kings can wreak.

"I'm yer pippin," said Mr. Doodle cheerfully. "If Mr. Goop's agreeable, jack-pots it is."

"The majority rules," gracefully assented Mr. Goop. "Jack-pots goes."

"Yer pleasure, gents!" then said Mr. Doodle.

"Two cards here," said Muggs.

"I'll take three," said Mr. Goop.

"Three 'll do me," added Mr. Doodle, and, after he had attended to their several wants, the two aces of the three cards he dealt himself looked so lonely that he gave them the companionship of the other brace of aces he had been holding on his lap. "Now shoot!"

"Five reds!" said Muggs, serene with the confidence imparted by four kings.

"I'm out!" said Mr. Goop discreetly.

"Darned if yer gonna bluff me like you done Goop!" said Mr. Doodle to Muggs. "I'll go ye ten better!"

"Raise ye twenty-five!" said Muggs.

"See ye, an' go ye another fifty!" said Mr. Doodle.

"There's yer fifty," said Muggs, "an' here's a hundred more!"

"There's yer hundred covered," said Mr. Doodle, "an' a hundred more on top o' it!"

"I got ye beat," said Muggs commiseratingly, "but I don't want to take yer pants, so I'm gonna call ye. Here's where I take somethin' home to the children. Whatcher got?"

In the fast-falling dusk Mr. Doodle laid down his hand, and the light was still strong enough for Muggs to distinguish four aces.

"That's good!" he faintly articulated. "Gents, I'm picked as clean as a Philadelphia dried chicken."

Mr. Doodle with his fat, pudgy fingers complacently harvested the abnormal pile of chips and bills which he and Muggs had industriously piled up while Mr. Goop, with pleasant anticipations of an after-division of the spoils, regarded the proceeding with a look of great cupidity.

"I guess kings has had their day," he cackled in a tone that was meant to be perfectly neutral.

"We'll have to ring down the curtain on a brief intermission," said Muggs, as he rose. "Other bus'ness presses, gents, but just as soon as I kin git my hooks on my share o' the receipts o' to-night's performance I'll be back with bells on."

After he had collected from the disappointed Mr. Pettigrew $66.40, which represented his percentage of the gross takings of the house, he returned in a spirit of beautiful optimism to the scene of carnage, and by dint of the most rigid economy succeeded in husbanding the last forty cents of this sum until the clock in the Methodist Church tower sepulchrally boomed twelve.

When Patsy, after his arduous labors, reached the hotel Maizie was still holding her anxious vigil at the key-hole of the connecting door, and, hearing his footsteps in the hall, she rushed out to meet him.

"Pa's been saying 'That's good!' all night," she announced, "and each time his voice has grown weaker."

Patsy was filled with the greatest concern by the information Maizie imparted, and his alarm was further increased by Muggs himself, for just then the minstrel magnate in a thoroughly wilted condition opened the door and slunk disconsolately out, remarking in hollow tones when he saw them:

"I'm busted—yes, I'm cleaner 'n a whistle. All that's left me is my breath. My roll's vamosed — an' I can't get the show out o' town!"

CHAPTER XV.

PATSY THE ANGEL.

EARLY next morning Muggs's indiscretion became known to the members of his troupe, and there was not a little uneasiness in consequence.

Professionals as a rule are a happy-go-lucky class not always provident in money matters. The Megatharians had only been out for a few weeks, and a summer's enforced idleness had drained their resources. Even if they had been so inclined there was not a minstrel among them in a position financially able to extend their manager assistance.

There was abundant reason for gloom, for it looked as though they were practically stranded in a strange place far away from their respective homes and friends, with no opportunity to relieve themselves, and only the dreary prospect of beating their way back on freight-trains or, worse still, walking the railroad ties.

But Muggs was a sly old fox who had been in plenty of just such predicaments before. After his night's sleep he was in a more cheerful frame of mind, and he at once set about to extricate himself and the others from the embarrassing situation into which all were plunged.

"Why don't you pawn that big diamond on your shirt-front, boss?" suggested Banks Gilgan.

"Now ye force me to a show-down," was Muggs's candid response. "It ain't a diamond, Gilgan—it ain't even a near-diamond. It's only an elegant specimen o' plateglass, backed up by mercury, an' if I had the gall to try to soak it I'd be arrested for mayhem."

They were in the hotel office; and from behind the desk Mr. Goop was grinning at him with ill-concealed triumph. But the tone of the manager was strictly confidential, so that the hotel keeper did not overhear what had been imparted about a presumably precious gem that had filled him with great covetousness.

Undeterred by the landlord's looks Muggs grabbed the receiver of the telephone and called up the depot agent.

"Hello, there," he said, "this is Mr. Muggs, proprietor o' the Megatharians. I wanna take the troupe to Jalap on our trunks."

"Can't do it, Mr. Muggs," came the discouraging response. "It's ag'in the Inter-State Commission's laws."

"Say," broke in Mr. Goop, who was an interested listener, "before you take yer trunks away, Muggs, you gotter come across with thirty-six dollars fur yer troupe's board."

"What's eatin' ye, you old crab?" demanded Muggs haughtily. "You're gonna git what's comin' to ye."

"Why don't you leave your diamond stud with him as security?" proposed Banks Gilgan.

"That's the talk!" said Mr. Goop greedily to Muggs. "To help ye out I'm willin' to take yer sparkler an' give ye a receipt in full fur all yer party's board."

"Yer a hard-hearted old rapscallion, an' no mistake," said Muggs. "I wouldn't have yer mean disposition, Goop, fur all the world. Yer is close as the next second. Ye don't know what mercy is, so there's no use a pleadin' with ye. You kin have the stone, an' it's a beaut!"

The transaction thereupon was closed, but the difficult problem of transporting the troupe to Jalap was still to be solved. Over the long-distance 'phone Muggs got in touch with Manager Peach of Peach's Palatial Playhouse in that town.

"Hello, Peach!" he called. "This is Muggs o' the Megatharian Minstrels talkin'. I want you to wire me a hundred."

"Wire you *what?*" called back Peach.

"I said a hundred."

"Where are you?"

"I'm over here in Grimsby."

"I thought you was in the State lunatic asylum."

"What's the matter with you, Peach? You can hold it out of to-night's receipts."

"Say, Muggs, I was sucker enough to take yer advance man's I. O. U. fur five dollars, an' I paid two-forty express charges on yer printin'. It don't look to me as if we'd play to even that."

"Stop yer kiddin', Peach, an' wire me the hundred."

"Wire ye nothin'!"

"How 'll we git to Jalap?"

"Walk!"

Peach rang off, and Muggs hung up the receiver with a worried look. Patsy had strolled up in time to hear the conversation.

"Mr. Muggs," he said, "how much 'll it cost to take the troupe to Jalap?"

"Why, about sixty dollars. There's the transfer bill besides, ye know."

"I'll pay it," said Patsy, and he took a roll of bills from his pocket. "Here's the money."

Muggs surveyed the roll with considerable awe.

"Say, kid," he asked curiously, "how much did ye touch him fur?"

"Touch who?" said Patsy.

"Why, Smith, o' course.

"I didn't touch him fur nothin'. Why do you ask?"

"Maybe you've got enough mazuma to buy into the show."

"Maybe I have, but maybe I'd ruther not," said Patsy guardedly. "There's the sixty dollars, Mr. Muggs, an', if it ain't enough, you kin call on me fur more."

Owing to the financial assistance rendered by Patsy the Megatharians were enabled to take the train for Jalap as scheduled. At the station just before leaving Muggs came to him, and said:

"I've bought a party-ticket fur twenty, kid, so you gotter blooch."

"Nix on the blooch!" said Patsy firmly.

"Now, look here, Harold," said Muggs, in an offended tone, "just because I done you a favor you musn't git the swelled head."

"What favor did you do me?" asked Patsy in surprise.

"Ain't I let you take the troupe to Jalap?" demanded Muggs.

"Mr. Muggs," said Patsy very decidedly, "me an' yer daughter Maizie's goin' to ride in chairs in the parlor-car. After this let the other fellers blooch!"

Patsy was as good as his word, and Maizie and he installed themselves in the chair-car to pass the short journey in as much comfort as possible.

He paid the Pullman conductor the extra fares for Maizie and himself, and gave the porter a quarter tip when the latter ran with a soft stool for her dainty little feet.

"That fellow must be the star of the troupe," said the conductor to the porter. "That's a swell dame he's got with him."

"Maizie," said Patsy admiringly, after they were luxuriously settled back in their seats, "I've often wondered at the highfalutin talk you hand out. Ye got yer pa skinned a mile."

"I'm a very superior person to pa mentally, Patsy," was Maizie's modest response. You see, I graduated from the Normal College. I'd have been a teacher, but I concluded I had too good a shape. I don't vary the millionth of an inch from the Venus de Milo."

"Ah, that accounts fur it, then," said Patsy. "But yer pa ain't no slouch, either, Maizie, at hittin' up big words. Have ye seen them bills he gits out? He oughter make a good plagiarist."

"What do you mean, Patsy?"

"Ain't a plagiarist a writer o' plays?"

"A plagiarist is not always a playwright," explained Maizie, "but a playwright is nearly always a plagiarist. Do you grasp me, Patsy?"

"I'd like to," he said earnestly. "Yer a mighty nice little armful, Maizie."

"I meant figuratively," she explained.

"So did I," he hastened to say. "I never seen a wren with a sweller figger 'n yourn, Maizie."

"No, Patsy, you misunderstand me," she went on. "Sometimes it pains me very much to hear you say 'I seen it' and 'I done it.' You don't seem to be able to get a strangle-hold on the English language. To speak plainly, your method of expression is distinctly on the fritz."

"Maybe you kin teach me, Maizie," he suggested humbly.

"Can, not kin, Patsy," she corrected.

"But we're coming to Jalap, and did you ever see such a bum-looking place? I wonder where pa digs up all these jerk-water tanks."

"Jalap sounds kinder like a medicine," he said.

"Yes," she responded, "but you can bet it's a tight old town. It takes more than a name to make people loosen up."

The porter obsequiously began the removal of imaginary dust from their attire, and Patsy rewarded his not altogether unselfish efforts with another quarter. Then the zealous black loaded himself with their belongings, and led the way to the car steps down which he assisted them with the utmost solicitude.

Out from the plebian cars piled Muggs and his honey boys, but Patsy's eyes were riveted on some one waiting among the throng of depot loungers.

"Maizie," he cried, in great astonishment, look who's here!"

Maizie turned in the direction in which he was gazing, and saw Dr. Thomas, who rushed toward them with his face beaming with pleasure.

"I've been waiting for you," he announced, wringing their hands with great satisfaction. "I saw in one of the dramatic papers you were booked to play in Jalap to-night, so I thought I'd give myself the pleasure of seeing you all."

Muggs came up just then, and the doctor greeted him in the same exuberant manner.

"Where are you stoppin', doctor?" asked Muggs.

"At the Park House," was the response. "I arrived some time ago."

"That's where Sniper's made arrangements fur the Megatharians," said Muggs.

"So the clerk told me," said Dr. Thomas. "I want you and Miss Maizie to go there in an automobile with me."

Nothing loath, they got in the automobile that he had in waiting, and Patsy, who with Jones had to give his immediate attention to the equipment and baggage, watched the party ride off.

"Why did he come here?" he thought curiously. "It ain't fur any good, you kin bet on that. I don't like that feller somehow. He's as diff'runt from his half-brother as night is to day. I feel as if he's gonna make trouble fur some one, an' I wonder if it's me!"

CHAPTER XVI.

THE INGRATIATING DOCTOR.

JONES, the stage carpenter, and Patsy rode up from the depot in the transfer wagon with Green, the local expressman, who did all the theatrical hauling.

"'Tain't no use goin' to the Palatial Playhouse," Green informed them, "because it's all locked up tighter 'n a drum. Peach has the bake-shop, besides runnin' the op'ry-house, an' we gotter git the keys from him."

In the business section of the town he stopped his bony nags before a bakery whose basement doors were open, and, after jumping out of the wagon, he hallooed down:

"Peach! Are ye down there, Peach?"

"Whatcher want?" boomed back a deep, sepulchral voice from the subterranean regions.

"It's Green, Peach! The minstrel boys has got here, an' we wanner put the stuff in the op'ry-house."

A fat, florid man, clad simply in trousers and undershirt, scowled up from below. His face was flecked with flour, and he kept rubbing off sticky lumps of dough that still clung obstinately to his hands.

"So they got here, after all," he ejaculated, evincing surprise. "Well, I can't do nothin' now. My hands is in the dough."

"Gimme the keys, Peach!" said Green. "I gotter git this load off the wagon an' move Mrs. Brown's pianner."

Reluctantly Peach put his fingers in his pocket and removed therefrom two keys on a rusted steel ring, which he passed up to Green. The latter took them gingerly, wiped them off with a dirty red cotton handkerchief, and jumped back in the wagon.

"They say that place down there," he confided to Jones and Patsy, "fur filth's got them Chicago slaughter-houses skinned a mile. Giddap!"

He guided his lazy steeds to Peach's Palatial Playhouse, whose name was the only pretentious part of the old, decaying structure that afforded a refuge for the unfortunate theatrical organizations which rashly tempted fate in Jalap, and as he unlocked the weather-beaten stage-door he volunteered the further information:

"Shows don't do well here. See where that there wall sags? Fo'ks is skeered the buildin's gonna fall down!"

With no one to assist them, Jones and Patsy disposed of the costume trunks in the limited number of dressing-rooms and then began to set the stage for the first part. While they were at their task Muggs, Maizie, and Dr. Thomas put in an appearance, and, with a sudden jealous pang, Patsy noticed that the doctor was most assiduous in his attentions to Maizie.

"I oughtn't 'a' booked Jalap," complained Muggs bitterly. "The advance sale at the drug-store's a measly dollar and seventy-five cents. Harold, here's a letter fur ye they gave me at the post-office."

"Fur me?" echoed Patsy in surprise. "Why, I didn't expect a letter."

"It's from Flubb & Dubby, the high mucky-mucks o' the theatrical bus'ness," said Muggs, who gleaned this information from the return address in the upper left-hand corner of the envelope he handed to Patsy. "Have ye been writin' to 'em?"

"No," replied Patsy.

He tore open the envelope, and read with amazement denoted by eyes distended and mouth agape:

New York, September 13.

Mr. Harold Evermond,
Care of Muggs's Megatharian Minstrels.

Dear Sir:

Our representative, Mr. Jukes, witnessed your performance with the minstrels at Lakeville, and was much impressed by your voice. Would you consider an offer of one hundred and fifty dollars a week to create one of the leading rôles in our new production, "Princess Prettypet"?

Very truly yours,
Flubb & Dubby.

"Well, I'm darned!" cried Patsy.

"What does it say?" asked the curious Muggs.

Without a word Patsy handed the missive to Maizie, who with much excitement read it aloud.

"Jukes!" repeated Muggs reflectively. "That must 'a' been the slick, dressy-lookin' guy who boned his way into the show at Lakeville fur nothin'. He said he was connected with Flubb & Dubby. When he hit me fur a pass I took him fur a phoney."

"Oh, Patsy!" Maizie rapturously exclaimed. "Are you going to accept the offer? It will be the making of you."

Patsy looked at her in an undecided way.

"Shall I, Maizie?" he asked.

"I shall miss you dreadfully," said Maizie, with a deep sigh.

"Take it, by all means," urged Dr. Thomas with great enthusiasm. "It's the opportunity of a lifetime. Why, your fortune's made if you get with Flubb & Dubby."

Patsy flashed on him a look of suspicion, for he felt that this apparently well-meant advice veiled a strong desire to get rid of him. He wondered if the doctor had any thought of trying to win Maizie's hand, for, knowing the other's pronounced aversion to the theatrical profession, he could not ascribe any other motive for his unexpected presence in Jalap.

This impression gathered strength when Muggs said:

"The doc here's a thinkin' o' buyin' into the Megatharians. He's stuck on the minstrel bus'ness, an' wants to travel with the boys. If I let him have a piece o' the show, of course, I'll strengthen it, an' play bigger towns."

Patsy recalled Dr. Thomas's unjustifiable attack upon actors, but he thought it best not to revert to it.

"I guess I'll just stick around fur a little while with the honey boys," he said. "I don't wanner leave the show flat. An' now I gotter hustle to make that parade."

Minstrels in delicate pearl-colored overcoats and high hats were hastening by to participate in this function, while outside, where the brass band had already congregated, the cornet and trombone players were testing their lungs in lusty practise.

Patsy, in one of the dressing-rooms, dived into a trunk for the necessary accouterment and, after he had arrayed himself like a lily of the field, joined his colleagues out in the street.

Soon, to an inspiring march, the gay procession moved off to incite, if possible, a sluggish public to witness the performance that night, while Muggs, through one of the dirt-grimed windows, watched his honey boys with a feeling of great depression as he remembered the appalling advance sale at the drug-store.

After his dinner at the Park House, Patsy went up to his room to pen a polite refusal to the flattering offer the mail had brought him from Flubb & Dubby.

The hotel was a comfortable, old-fashioned structure, and the windows of its rooms were flush with the floor, opening out upon broad-roofed verandas built on all sides of the house.

The day was mild and pleasant, so before Patsy began to indite his letter he flung one of the windows wide open to admit the breeze which had all the invigorating tang of autumn.

While he was in all the throes of composition he heard a light step on the porch, and Dr. Thomas, with a cigar in his mouth, looked in through the open window.

" Ah, my young friend," he said pleasantly, " so this is your room, eh? May I come in?"

" I was just writin' a letter," said Patsy rather ungraciously.

His tone was uninviting, and showed that he wished to be alone; but, nevertheless, Dr. Thomas crossed the threshold of the open window and calmly usurped possession of a chair opposite to Patsy.

" My dear boy," he at once began, " I want to be your friend. Why won't you let me?"

" I ain't tried to stop ye, have I?" asked Patsy, somewhat taken aback. " I guess we kin be friends all right. If we ain't, it's up to you."

" I instinctively feel that you dislike me," said Dr. Thomas, " when really I have done nothing to incur your ill-will. My half-brother has taken a great fancy to you, and I don't see why we can't be the best of friends."

" I like your half-brother," said Patsy. " He's invited me to make him a good long visit at Lakeview."

" He has!" said Dr. Thomas, with his brow contracting in a slight frown. " Are you going to accept the invitation?"

" Yes," said Patsy, " when the season o' the minstrels is over."

" That will be fine!" said Dr. Thomas, but, in spite of the cordial smile that accompanied his words, the tone of his voice was harsh and forbidding. " We shall see a great deal of each other, then. I'm going to try my best to make you like me as well as you do my half-brother."

" We oughter git along all right together," said Patsy awkwardly.

" I haven't forgotten what you told me about your parents," said Dr. Thomas. " I suppose you've still got that marriage certificate about you, haven't you?"

" It's in my coat-pocket now," said Patsy.

" I've been thinking that maybe I could be of assistance to you. If your father's living, it might be possible to find him. Why don't you let me try? If you'll entrust the certificate into my hands I'll make every effort to locate him."

" No, I won't give it up," said Patsy bluntly.

" Why not?"

" Ye might lose it."

Dr. Thomas rose abruptly and, with visible annoyance on his face, went to the window, where he flecked with a jerk the gray ash from his cigar out on the porch.

" Well," he said with affected indifference, " possibly you're right. At any rate, I want you to know I'm eager to be of help. And now I must leave you. I've got an appointment with Miss Maizie to take her out horseback-riding."

CHAPTER XVII.

MAIZIE IN DANGER.

PATSY finished his letter, and when he went down to the desk to mail it he noticed, just outside the door, two saddle-horses which had been brought around from the livery-stable that was attached to the hotel.

They appeared to be restless, mettlesome animals, and the man in charge of them was experiencing some difficulty to hold them in check. One kept rearing, and the hostler jerked savagely at the reins with a repeated "Whoa there!" to compel docility.

From the ladies' entrance of the hotel Dr. Thomas and Maizie made their appearance, the latter attired in a black riding-habit that seemed glued to her shapely little form, showing her curves in all their ripening perfection.

High boots jealously encased her trim little ankles, and on her head perched rakishly a glistening squat black beaver hat.

"Great Scott!" ejaculated Banks Gilgan, who, with other Megatharians, was an admiring observer. "Where did Maizie get the togs?"

The proprietor of the Park House, a very progressive, up-to-date young fellow named Phelps, heard him and said:

"Why, my wife loaned them to her. Fit her to perfection, don't they?"

"Those hosses are rather skittish," remarked Wilkins, the interlocutor. "Are they safe?"

"Sure they're safe," said Phelps confidently. "They're just a little frisky, that's all. They've been in the stable for a few days without any exercise, and feel their oats."

"Maizie kin manage either of 'em," boasted Muggs, who was among the onlookers. "She ain't afraid o' tackling anything on four legs. Why, when we was out on a ranch in the Indian Territory two summers ago, she got to be a reg'lar bronco-buster."

Patsy noticed that Maizie chose the more spirited creature of the two. After she was assisted into the saddle by Dr. Thomas her horse exhibited signs of ill-temper, plunging and rearing, but she displayed her skill at horsemanship and easily maintained her mount.

After satisfying himself that Maizie was well adapted to take care of herself, Dr. Thomas quickly swung himself into the saddle of the other horse.

"Be sure to go to the glen," Phelps called out to them. "That road's the best of all, and there are lots of good views. Follow Main Street right out."

Dr. Thomas nodded, and, giving their horses the reins, the two rode off on a gallop.

"Mr. Muggs," said Patsy, "can I speak to you?"

"Why, cert'nly," said Muggs. "Let's go over to those two chairs in the corner. What is it, Harold?"

They seated themselves out of ear-shot of the rest, and Patsy began:

"I turned down that there offer from Flubb & Dubby."

"Then yer gonna stick to the old Megatharians, eh?" said Muggs. "Well, Harold, I appreciate what ye done. You know, don't ye, Dr. Thomas wants to buy a piece o' the show? When he does I'm a gonna boost yer salary."

"That's what I want to talk about," said Patsy.

"You mean yer pay envelope?"

"No; about Dr. Thomas's buyin' inter the show."

"What of it?"

"Don't sell him a int'rest."

"Why, my poor boy," Muggs pityingly cried, "do you realize what yer sayin'? When ye hear the flap of an angel's wings in the theatrical bus'ness, ye gotter grab on to the wings. Suckers is so few an' far between, Harold, they should be nursed."

"I done you a favor in gittin' the show to Jalap, didn't I?" said Patsy.

"I dunno whether it was a favor or not," was the dubious response. "I don't believe the twelve apostles could even draw their breath in Jalap. If I kin only git out o' here with a skin, I'll give it a wide berth an' the ha-ha forever 'n' ever, amen!"

It was evident to Patsy that Muggs was an unexpurgated edition of Maizie, though not in her *de luxe* binding, and with more typographical mistakes.

"Don't ye think we'll have a good house to-night?" he asked.

"Think!" repeated Muggs. "You kin bet yer B. V. D.'s we'll be left flat on our backs."

"Well, I'll git the show out," said Patsy confidently.

"You will!" uttered Muggs incredulously. "Say, kid, how much have ye still got left in yer kick?"

"Enough, an' then some," replied Patsy, with the air of a bloated bondholder. "Don't ye remember sayin' at Squantum you had a hunch I'd be a mascot to ye? Well, don't do nothin' rash. I'm a gonna see ye through."

He rose as he spoke and started toward the door, leaving Muggs gaping at him in wonder and surprise.

Patsy went out on the street, undecided how to try to pass the afternoon, and while in this state of mind an oncoming jitney automobile was brought to a sudden stop directly before him, and the freckle-faced youth driving it shouted out:

"Hello, Patsy McGuire!"

"Why, Micky O'Shea," was Patsy's astonished ejaculation as he recognized an eastwhile Squantum friend, "what are ye doin' here?"

"Oh, we've left Squantum," said Micky O'Shea. "I'm pickin' up a few nickels with this jitney. Heard you'd joined the minstrels. Purty soft, ain't it?"

"Yep," said Patsy. "I'm Harold Evermond now."

"Ye don't say!" exclaimed O'Shea admiringly. "Jump in the buzz-wagon, Patsy or Harold, an' I'll take ye fur a ride."

Patsy sprang up on the seat beside him.

"Say!" he cried. "Kin we go out to the glen?"

"Surest thing ye know!" said O'Shea.

"Then whoop up yer old devil-wagon! Let her go, Gallagher! Speed up the speedometer! Give her the gasoline!"

O'Shea obligingly let out his old rattle-trap of a machine, and they tore down Main Street out into the country.

"Yer some driver, Micky," said Patsy as he strained his eyes looking ahead. "There's life in the old gal yet!"

Suddenly from where there was a turn of the road ahead there came the sound of men's excited voices, and as O'Shea slowed down and they rounded the curve, Patsy noticed Dr. Thomas, who had dismounted and was trying to quiet his unruly horse.

A steam-roller in the immediate vicinity which had been engaged in the repair of the macadam evidently had been the cause of some trouble, and far ahead Patsy could discern the other horse, ridden by Maizie, galloping madly on.

The reins had slipped from her fingers, and she was leaning over, with her arms grimly wound around the horse's neck.

"Let her out!" cried Patsy to O'Shea. "Don't stop! Overtake the other horse just as quick as you kin!"

O'Shea promptly opened up the old machine, and they whisked past Dr. Thomas and the men in charge of the steam-roller, paying no attention to their loud cries to stop.

On and on went the horse, with the automobile in hot pursuit.

Quickly the machine gained on the frightened animal, and, jumping back into the rear seat, Patsy gave instructions to his companion.

"Run as close to the hoss as you kin," he said. "As you come up, try to slow down to the same pace."

"I'm skeered of his swervin' inter the ditch," was O'Shea's hesitating response.

"Do as I say," urged Patsy; and O'Shea, who was an expert driver, obeyed.

The automobile overtook the galloping animal, and O'Shea adroitly guided it alongside.

When the automobile and horse were abreast Patsy leaned over and, seizing Maizie in his arms, transferred her from the horse's back into the body of the machine.

This feat was accomplished just in the nick of time, for almost the next instant the horse swerved as O'Shea had feared and plunged into the ditch, losing his footing and rolling over a number of times.

Maizie did not faint, or even display the slightest sign of agitation, as she righted herself, broke from Patsy's still embracing arms, and adjusted the beaver hat which set somewhat awry on her pretty head.

"What's the matter?" she asked indignantly. "Why didn't you leave me alone?"

"Maizie," said Patsy reproachfully, "you might 'a' been killed!"

"Killed nothing!" she scornfully retorted. "I'm perfectly able to take care of myself. The horse would soon have become exhausted."

"He might 'a' throwed ye, Maizie," ventured Patsy timidly, "an' then ye'd 'a' got a cracked nut."

"Thrown, not throwed, Patsy," corrected Maizie; "but I want you to know right now there's no horse alive that can throw me. Still, I don't want you to think I'm in the least inappreciative of your efforts, however misguided they were. I'm sure pa will only be too glad to give your friend a pass for two for to-night's performance."

"I forgot to introduce him," said Patsy. "His name's Micky O'Shea."

"Pleased to meet you, Micky," said Maizie. "Any friend of Patsy's is a friend of mine. And now, if you both don't mind, I'll go back with you in the automobile."

"How about the horse?" asked Patsy.

The animal had got on his feet again, and was placidly cropping the grass in the ditch.

"I should worry," said Maizie, with an indifferent shrug of her shoulders. "I didn't want to go out horseback-riding with Dr. Thomas in the first place, only pa made me. He wants me to jolly him along. I suppose he's afraid the angel will flutter his wings and fly away."

CHAPTER XVIII.

IN THE DEAD OF NIGHT.

THE advance sale for the performance of Muggs's Megatharian Minstrels in Jalap that night was unusually light when a clerk brought the sheet from the drug-store, an unpleasant augury of poor business to follow.

Still, minstrel companies, as a rule, do not enjoy large advance sales, nearly all of the receipts being taken in at the box-office after the doors are open; so that Muggs did not lose hope of a good house, relying mainly upon the free open-air concert of his brass band just before the performance to draw the crowd in.

The members of the band got out and nearly blew their heads off, but few of the people they attracted straggled into the box-office.

With a feeling of great depression Muggs went to the back of the house, where Wilkins accosted him.

"I was thinking, boss," he said, "we oughter drop our grand opening medley, 'Hear Dem Bells,' and substitute instead 'The Star-Spangled Banner.' It would go great in times like these."

"It's a mighty good idea," said Muggs; "but the boys ain't up in it, are they?"

"I've been rehearsin' 'em," said Wilkins, "and they're all O. K. You can bet little Willie's on the job!"

"Good!" cried Muggs approvingly. "Put it on to-night. What are all those bums a doin' on the stage?"

He looked at the entrances, which were choked with loaferish-appearing men and boys, and a big, husky fellow close by scowled at him.

"That's my stage-crew," the man said.

"Who are you?"

"I'm the carpenter o' the house."

"Well, how many have ye got workin' fur you?"

"There's forty grips, thirty clearers, an' twenty electric-light operators. I guess we kin handle the show all right."

The curtain went up on possibly a hundred people scattered all over the house, and as the company, to the band's stirring accompaniment, burst enthusiastically into "The Star-Spangled Banner," every person but one in the audience rose.

Patsy, from the semicircle, saw Dr. Thomas and Maizie in one of the boxes, and they were standing with the rest. Then his eyes strayed to the solitary person who was still sitting down, and he was filled with the greatest indignation.

Others, too, had noticed the action of the man, who was well advanced in years; and there were hisses, mingled with cries of "Shame!" and "Put him out!"

In a white heat of rage Peach, the local manager, came quickly down the aisle and, shaking his clenched fist angrily at the man, shouted:

"Ye can't insult the flag in my house an' git by with it. Where's yer patriotism, ye dirty skunk? Go out to the box-office an' git yer money back!"

"I'm a vet'ran o' the war with Spain," remonstrated the man, "an' just as patriotic as you be."

"Then why don't ye stand with the rest?" demanded Muggs.

"I can't," said the man. "My legs was shot off."

He held up two crutches as convincing proof of his statement, and Peach beat a hasty retreat up the aisle.

With the excitement created by this interruption subsiding, the performance took its course until the time came for Patsy to render his ballad, "Girl o' Mine."

The few people who were his auditors offered scant encouragement for a display of any vocal ability; but Maizie in herself was sufficient inspiration, and he sang to her with more sweetness and feeling than he had ever before exhibited in his short career with the minstrels.

"What a grand voice he has!" exclaimed Maizie enthusiastically to Dr. Thomas.

"If you ask me," he replied, "I'd say he'd be all right peddling fish!"

Tremendous applause greeted Patsy's effort, and he received encore after encore, finally taking his seat to continued applause, and rising to bow his acknowledgment again and again.

"You've hogged the whole show, kid," said Wilkins. "That sure was an ovation."

When the intermission came a great, harsh-toned bell in the vicinity suddenly began to clang, and from outside came the clamor of voices and hurrying feet.

The loafers in the wings, who, under the guise of stage-hands, were witnessing the performance for nothing, hastily decamped, and the handful of people who composed the audience began to scurry up the aisles as fast as they could.

Some of the latter stopped at the box-office and asked for the return of their money, but such demands were refused with a good deal of hot argument on both sides.

"What's the matter?" Muggs asked Peach.

"The engine-house is on fire," was that worthy's excited response.

By the time the curtain was rung up on the olio the auditorium was completely deserted, and the only people left in the building were the performers and a few loyal house attaches.

At a small table in the box-office, oblivious of this condition, Muggs and Peach were engaged in counting up the gross receipts, which reached the dismal total of $66.25.

"Let's see," said Peach reflectively. "The terms was seventy-thirty. What do ye make yer share?"

"Forty-six dollars and thirty-eight cents," said Muggs, after figuring.

"Yer wrong," said Peach. "It's $46.37."

"Well, it figgers out exactly $46.37½," maintained Muggs.

"So ye wanter do me outer a half-cent," accused Peach. "Look here, Muggs, ye can't put one over on me."

"Come across with the $46.37, then, an' look pleasant," said Muggs.

"Not by a long shot," said Peach. "There's the $5.00 I. O. U. o' yer agent, Sniper, an' $2.40 express charges on yer paper to come outer yer share."

Just as this matter was satisfactorily adjusted Wilkins, still in his make-up, darkened the doorway.

"What shall we do, boss?" he asked Muggs. "The audience has gone."

Muggs and Peach immediately rushed out, and a careful inspection of the surroundings fully substantiated the interlocutor's statement.

"We'll have to call off the rest o' the performance," said Peach. "There's no use a givin' it to air."

He went to the electric switchboard and thriftily turned off the lights in the front of the house, the foots, and borders.

As quickly as possible, the minstrels got off the burnt cork and, hastily donning their street clothes, joined the throngs congregated at advantageous sight-seeing points in the neighborhood of the conflagration.

All the town, apparently, was there, watching and encouraging the heroic efforts of the volunteer fire department to conquer the flames that were swiftly consuming the building.

Fortunately when the fire broke out, it had not reached sufficient height to prevent members of the department from securing their helmets, rubber coats, and boots from the individual lockers, and running the engine and hose-carriage out.

The flames gained headway while they were trying to build a fire in the engine, for the wood was damp; and after they succeeded in getting up steam in the boiler, the hose unfortunately burst in three places, with the resultant loss of nearly all the water.

But the chief throughout maintained admirable composure and shouted out directions through a fire-trumpet, until finally the whole structure collapsed into a mass of smoldering ruins on which the firemen triumphantly squirted a thin stream of water from the rejuvenated hose.

Patsy and Jones had hastened through their work after the incompleted performance, and were among the sight-seers. As the crowd thinned out Patsy yawned and said:

"I guess I'll hit the hay."

Jones walked back with him to the Park House, where, in the office, Roscoe Fothergill inveigled the stage carpenter into a game of fifteen-ball pool.

Patsy got his key from the clerk and went up to his room. The night was rather warm, and he flung wide the window opening out on the porch.

It had been a somewhat strenuous day for him, and he was pretty well fagged out. After he was in his pajamas, he turned off the electric light and tumbled into bed, dropping off to slumber soon afterward.

In spite of the fact that he was thoroughly exhausted, his sleep was not a restful one, and it was disturbed by bad dreams. In these the haunting vision of Dr. Thomas was always present, and he seemed bent on Patsy's destruction.

Some time in the night Patsy suddenly awoke with a feeling that another was in the room. He sat up in bed and listened with his heart in his mouth.

The room was in pitch-black darkness, so that he could distinguish nothing; but from the direction of the chair on which he had placed his clothes, he fancied he could hear a faint rustle like that made by paper.

Springing from his bed, Patsy groped his way toward the chair, and while he was doing so some one attempted to rush past him, almost knocking him over.

Patsy reached out and grasped him by the coat, only to be struck by some hard object in the other's hand.

Stunned to unconsciousness, he dropped like a log to the floor, while his murderous assailant fled with frantic haste through the open window.

Just how long he lay where he had fallen Patsy did not know, but when eventually he opened his eyes, the first gray light of the coming dawn filled the room.

In his clenched hand was a button which apparently he had wrenched from the coat of his nocturnal visitor in their momentary struggle.

His head was aching terribly, and when he examined it there were locks of hair matted with clotted blood from a severe contusion just above the temple.

With some difficulty he got upon his feet, and observed close to the chair where his clothes were some papers scattered on the carpet.

He staggered toward the chair and searched the trouser-pocket in which he had placed his money, fearing that it would be gone, but to his great relief it was still there, intact.

Then he picked up the scattered papers, and was further relieved to find the marriage certificate he so prized among them.

He went to the wash-stand, where he soaked the wound upon his head with cold water and then wrapped a wringing wet towel around it, after which he felt better.

"I wonder who he was?" he mused curiously. "He wasn't after money, that's sure."

The thought of the marriage certificate then occurred to him, but he could not conceive of its having sufficient interest for any one to resort to such desperate means to gain possession of it.

He examined the button, just an ordinary black bone one of the kind attached to countless coats.

"If I was *Sherlock Holmes* or *Old Sleuth*," he thought, "it 'd be a cinch to find out who that feller is. This here button's a corkin' good clue!"

CHAPTER XIX.

FLUSH TIMES IN FACTORYVILLE.

WHEN later Patsy met Maizie at breakfast, he still had a throbbing head, but he bore no noticeable effects from his recent exciting encounter.

Over their bacon and eggs he narrated to her just what had happened, and she was naturally very much agitated over the recital.

"I wonder who it could have been?" she speculated. "It would be just like that Bill Bohee to do such a mean, contemptible thing."

"But what 'd be his object, Maizie?" demurred Patsy. "He couldn't 'a' wanted to rob me."

"You know perfectly well, Patsy," she said, "that Bill's insanely jealous of you ever since I gave him the order to right-about, face, and march. I admit at first I was rather impressed by him, but I soon discovered he was very cheap pewter. Why, in all our acquaintance he never presented me with anything except some coupons he got with a few bum cigars, and when I tried to redeem them at the premium station, I was told the offer had expired. The most he gives any one is an unkind thought."

"No, Maizie," said Patsy slowly; "I don't think it was Bill. The only one I kinder suspicion is Dr. Thomas."

"Why, what would be his motive?" she asked.

"My parents' marriage certificate. Ever since I showed it to him in his office at Lakeville he's been dead set on gittin' it away from me. I dunno why it is, Maizie, but I gotter hunch he could tell somethin' about my father if he wanted to."

"Will you let me see the certificate?" she asked.

Patsy handed it to her, and she opened it, glancing over its contents, and remarking at last:

"The names of the contracting parties are John H. Smith and Mary Graham. That's a coincidence."

"What do you mean?" he questioned.

"Hasn't it occurred to you, Patsy, that Smith is the name of Dr. Thomas's rich half-brother at Lakeville?"

"Yes, I know," he said slowly; "but his first name's Herbert, an' the name o' this one's John."

"Still, the John H. Smith of the certificate may be a relative of Herbert Smith and Dr. Thomas," maintained Maizie. "That might account for the doctor's wanting to get it."

"I never thought o' that," said Patsy, drawing a deep breath. "I wish I knew o' some safe place where I could keep it."

"Patsy," she said, "would you trust Mr. Herbert Smith?"

"With my life," was his fervent response.

"Then why don't you send the certificate to him? It would be perfectly safe if you registered it in the mail. If there's anything wrong you can depend upon him to let you know what it is."

"I'll do it, Maizie," he said at once.

Further conversation on the subject was interrupted by the appearance of Muggs and Dr. Thomas at the door of the dining-room, and Patsy hastily secreted the paper in his coat-pocket without being observed by either.

As they took seats at the table the doctor's face was inscrutable, and he bore Patsy's searching gaze with the utmost composure, betraying no sign of guilt whatever.

"It's a beautiful morning," he said cheerfully, addressing the remark to Patsy. "Did you sleep well last night?"

"No," said Patsy gruffly, as he still stared at the other. "Some one disturbed me."

"Indeed!" said Dr. Thomas complacently, and just then Muggs broke in with great exultation:

"I just gotter wire from Biller, the manager at Factoryville, sayin' the house is completely sold out fur to-night. Sniper, the agent, wrote me we'd do well, but you know how full o' hot air agents are. I just thought he was ravin' again."

"Remember, Mr. Muggs," said Patsy significantly as he rose, "yer to let me take the show to Factoryville."

"Why, yes, Harold," replied Muggs condescendingly, "I believe I did promise you that you could. I'm a little short o' cash, an' I don't wanner draw on my New York bankers."

Patsy went out to the office, where he wrote to Mr. Smith a brief letter of explanation, which he placed with the certificate in a large envelope he secured at the desk. This he addressed carefully, afterward registering the communication at the post-office for safe transmission through the mail.

Muggs had sufficient funds about him to discharge his obligations at the hotel, but at the railroad station Patsy supplied the wherewithal to transport the troupe to the next town from which such heartening intelligence had been received.

Of course, Dr. Thomas paid his own fare, and he furthermore made arrangements for three seats in the chair-car for Muggs, Maizie, and himself.

With the feeling that the doctor had slighted him solely to separate him from Maizie during the journey, Patsy likewise secured a seat in the chair-car, though his resources were commencing to run alarmingly low.

To Patsy the trip was unpleasant because Dr. Thomas tried to monopolize Maizie's society, in which proceeding he was aided and abetted by Muggs in every way possible. When they had traveled most of the distance between the two towns Muggs suggested going to the smoking compartment, a proposition to which the doctor reluctantly assented.

While the two were making their way down the aisle to the end of the car, Maizie found the opportunity to say to Patsy:

"Pa's just crazy to unload on him a half-interest in the Megatharians, but my own opinion is the doctor's stalling. He pretends he's anxious to get soaked, but I don't think he's got the money."

"Yer pa promised me he wouldn't sell him a int'rest," said Patsy.

"Pa's a theatrical manager, and he'll promise anything," said Maizie. "He's a producer himself, so he wants to make everybody else produce. But even if he put the doctor through a clothes-wringer, all he could squeeze from him would be a lot of bull."

"It's funny the doc wants to git in the show bus'ness," said Patsy. "He told me he hated every one in it."

"When it comes to being two-faced," said Maizie, "he's got *Dr. Jekyll* and *Mr. Hyde* beaten to a frazzle."

"Did you notice his coat?" asked Patsy.

"No," said Maizie with sudden interest. "Was one of the buttons missing?"

"They were all there," replied Patsy, "but the coat was new."

They came at last to Factoryville, and here a scene of surprising industry met their gaze.

On the outskirts of the place there were several enormous munitions plants whose detached buildings extended for a long distance on both sides of the railroad, and through the myriad windows of these they could see hordes of men, women, boys, and girls actively at their duties.

Huge factories belched black, greasy volumes of smoke, transforming the blue sky to a pall of leaden gray, while additions to the big structures were hastily going up on all sides.

Rows upon rows of cheap one-storied cottages were springing up like toadstools to meet the extraordinary demands of an influx of people attracted by steady labor with big pay.

It was evident that a small, sluggish town was being magically transformed into a good-sized city.

The train was crowded, and it emptied out when the stop was made at the station, for this was the Mecca of many workaday pilgrims. Throngs were in the depot, and a live-wire atmosphere permeated it. Automobiles rushed hither and thither, and it seemed to Patsy that every one rode and no one walked.

He gave his help to Jones, and the transfer-man proudly explained that the big, new electric truck which he had brought for the scenery and baggage was a recent investment made necessary by the rapid growth of his business.

At Biller's Theater the gentleman who bestowed the honor of his name upon that amusement edifice exchanged greetings with Muggs, and both were excessively cordial in their manner, their rare good humor emanating from the prospects of big financial returns.

"We oughter 'a' put in a matinée," said Biller enthusiastically. "It 'd 'a' been a sell-out. The house is completely gone fur to-night. Why, even a dog-show or a flea-circus could play to S. R. O. in this here town. I'm 'a' bookin' the shows in one right after another, an' they're all a gittin' the dough. When I can't connect with a dramatic I'm a flashin' the pitchers. I'll give a guarantee to any one skeered o' playin' the town, an' take a chance at anything. I'm a buildin' another theater seatin' fifteen hundred down the street, fur this one ain't big enough to hold the people."

He stopped only because he was out of breath, thereby giving Muggs a chance to ask:

"What's the cause o' the boom?"

"Big gover'ment contracks," said Biller exultantly. "Millions 'n' millions o' dollars. Everything's goin' lickety-split night 'n' day, an' the people's spendin' their money like drunken sailors. My receipts is enormous. 'Uncle Josh Spruceby' got seven hundred and forty dollars; 'Uncle Tom's Cabin,' two nights an' a matinée, nineteen hundred and sixty dollars; an' las' night 'The Beautiful Bowery Burlesquers' jammed 'em up to the roof."

"That's a punk show," was Muggs's comment.

"It was Belladonna, the champeen muscle-dancer o' the world, that drawed the crowd," explained Biller. "The manager got out bills tellin' what a wiggler she was, an' he offered one thousand dollars to any lady in Factoryville who could outwiggle her, the jedges to be three reputable citizens."

"Did any one accept the challenge?" questioned Muggs.

"Naw!" said Biller. "No one dast, but it packed 'em in like sardines, jest the same!"

CHAPTER XX.

A BROIL WITH BOHEE.

HAVING completed the duties he performed in conjunction with Jones the stage-carpenter and contributed as well to all the glories of the parade, which Muggs insisted upon giving in spite of the fact that the house was entirely sold out for that night, Patsy had the remainder of the day to himself, and after dinner Maizie and he decided upon a good long walk out into the country.

In the short time they had known each other a mutual fondness had sprung up in their young hearts, and each day this was ripening into a strong affection.

Under Patsy's rough exterior Maizie was convinced there beat a heart of pure gold, while he was firm in the faith that in all the world there never was another such girl as she. The words of the song he sang seemed to voice his feelings for her exactly:

It would grieve me
If you'd leave me,
Girl o' mine!

There had been several early frosts, and the leaves of the trees and shrubbery were beginning to turn to red and gold. The clumps of sumac berries showed crimson, and the goldenrod like a vast army flaunted yellow plumes in the fields. The autumn flowers completed a gay kaleidoscope of colors.

Patsy knocked at the door of Maizie's room, and she opened it all ready for the prospective walk, with a cute Tam o' Shanter set roguishly on her head and a white sweater enveloping snugly her trim little person.

That was one of his many reasons for liking Maizie. She never kept him waiting, and always seemed to anticipate his coming.

While they walked together through the hall, and he regarded her with open admiration, they came upon a bell-boy who had a coat thrown over his arm.

"Wait a minute," said Patsy suddenly to the boy. "Whose coat's that?"

"It's Dr. Thomas's," was the boy's response. "I took it out to have a button sewed on it."

"Did he have the button?" Patsy asked.

"No, he'd lost it," said the boy. "The tailor put another one on it."

"Lemme see," said Patsy, and he took from his vest-pocket the button he had carefully preserved from his struggle, and compared it with those upon the coat. It was a perfect match for three, but it differed slightly from the fourth.

"That 'll do," said Patsy, after he had made his examination. "You kin take the coat to the doctor."

The boy went wonderingly on his way, and Maizie curiously asked.

"Is it the missing button, Patsy?"

"Yes," he replied. "One thing I'm sure of, Maizie. Dr. Thomas is the guy who sneaked into my room, an' he must 'a' been after that marriage certificate. As the advertisements o' that breakfast dope says, 'there's a reason.'"

"You'll have to look out for him, Patsy," she warned. "He means to do you harm. I've been convinced of that ever since he tried to tip you out of the boat."

When they were outside of the hotel Patsy glanced up at the building and said quickly:

"Look up in the corner room, Maizie. There he is now."

Maizie followed his gaze, and saw Dr. Thomas at the window covertly watching them. He evidently called to some one, for in another instant Bill Bohee joined him.

"He's got Bill Bohee with him," said Maizie, "I shouldn't wonder if they were hatching up some scheme. You know that birds of a feather flock together."

"They're birds all right," said Patsy sententiously.

They struck at a free, swinging gait for the open country, leaving the smoke-grimed town behind, and Maizie took joy in gathering the goldenrod that lined the wayside.

The air had a winey tang in it, bearing the fragrant whiff of the ripened apples in the orchards, from one of which Patsy audaciously pilfered some fruit.

When they were far from the town they came upon a noisy little brook, and where an old decaying tree had fallen they sat upon its trunk to rest.

The spot was a highly romantic one, and just the place to ask Maizie the question Patsy had on the tip of his tongue, but just then she was eating an apple which somehow did not seem to fit into the general order of things.

"Maizie," he awkwardly began, "have ye ever thought—"

"Look, Patsy!" she interrupted, suddenly stopping munching her apple. "There they are again!"

Patsy looked up, and to his great annoyance saw Dr. Thomas and Bill Bohee fast approaching.

"Well, of all the nerve!" he cried indignantly. "They've follered us."

He glared suddenly at them as they drew near, and, undisturbed by his repellent looks, Dr. Thomas remarked with feigned enthusiasm:

"What a pretty spot! It would be just the place for a picnic."

"Two's comp'ny, three's a crowd, an' four's against the fire laws," said Patsy angrily. "What do ye mean by chasin' us this way?"

"I guess the roads is free to everybody," retorted Bohee impudently. "We got as much right to 'em as you have."

"There's plenty o' room fur all," was Patsy's rejoinder. "Just tell us the way yer goin', an' we'll go the other way."

"Wait a minute, you big slob!" said Bohee, advancing threateningly. "I gotter bone to pick with you!"

"A bone!" repeated Dr. Thomas, in a sarcastic voice. "I should say it was a rag, a bone, and a hank of hair."

"I dunno what you mean," said Patsy stupidly.

"I do," spoke up Maizie. "He's speaking disrespectfully of me."

"Don't do that," snarled Patsy at the doctor, "or I'll crack yer nut just as you did mine!"

"What do you mean?" asked Dr. Thomas.

"Just what I said," insisted Patsy. "You came to my room last night to rob me. Don't deny it because I got the proof. I'd have ye arrested if it wasn't fur yer half-brother, Mr. Smith."

"Why, you're crazy!" charged Dr. Thomas. "I was with Bill here and his brother Gus at the fire, after which I went to my room and retired. If you say I was in your room you lie!"

"Don't butt in, doc," said Bill. "Lemme attend to him. I'm gonna show him he can't take my gal away."

"I'm not your girl," denied Maizie indignantly. "I hate you, Bill Bohee!"

"Oh, is that so?" he sneered. "Well, all I know is you was dead stuck on me before he came from the poorhouse."

"The poorhouse!" echoed Patsy.

"Yes. Wasn't you whelped at the poorhouse?"

Patsy whisked off his coat and handed it with his cherished plug hat to Maizie.

"Hold 'em," he instructed. "I'm agonna lick this guy."

"Yes, lick him good and hard," she urged. "If you don't wallop the earth with him I'll never speak to you again."

Bill Bohee chuckled confidently as he peeled off his coat.

"Why, you poor boob," he pityingly cried, "do ye know what yer up against? Me an' brother Gus traveled two seasons with Spink's Athaletic Carnival, an' I was a champeen lightweight. I took on all-comers, an' never was defeated—see? I've had some goes at the Madison Square Garden, an' believe me, bo, the slats that got pushed in was in the other corner. Come on, an' I'll murder ye!"

"Gee, but you must hate yerself!" said Patsy, undaunted by the other's bombastic talk. "I've moved pianos, so I guess I kin handle a great big stiff like you."

Without any further ado the two closed in on each other, while Maizie looked fearfully on, and a malicious smile curled Dr. Thomas's thin lip.

It was plain that Bohee had had some experience in the squared circle, though perhaps he had exaggerated his prowess. At any rate, he exhibited far more pugilistic skill than his opponent.

In quick succession Patsy received some nasty body blows against which he made a sorry defense. Bill landed almost at will upon him, playing for his stomach, and Patsy began to puff like a grampus, showing distinct signs of distress.

Anticipating that he would be ingloriously knocked out by Bill's superior tactics, he wound himself tenaciously around his tormentor's person, pinioning his arms, and with sheer strength bore him to the ground. Quick as a wink his fingers of iron encircled the other's throat, and he began to squeeze it in a viselike grip.

More and more he exerted his pressure till Bill's face grew like a boiled lobster in hue, his eyes nearly popped out of his head, and his tongue lolled from his open mouth.

"Stop!" commanded Dr. Thomas, in great alarm. "You're choking him to death!"

"Have ye got enough?" cried Patsy savagely to the helpless Bill.

Unable to speak Bill signified his assent by a barely perceptible nod of his head, whereat Patsy relaxed his grip and sprang up.

"I may not be much on the box," he said complacently, "but I'm purty good on the strangle. Maizie, gimme my coat an' plug hat."

Assisted by Dr. Thomas Bill struggled to his feet.

"I'll be even with you fur this," he threatened Patsy, between gasps.

"It was the most unprovoked assault I ever saw," supplemented Dr. Thomas.

"Oh, it was, was it?" sneered Patsy. "Now look 'a' here! If both you fellers know what's good fur ye you'll go while the goin's good."

Dr. Thomas nervously began to move off, but Bill still lingered, glaring malevolently at Patsy.

"Say," he cried, still gasping, "Muggs's Megatharian Minstrels ain't big enough to hold us two. I'll put it up to the boss, an' if he don't fire you me an' brother Gus 'll blow the show. You know what that means, don't ye? Muggs can't do without us, an' if we quit there won't be no performance to-night!"

"Git!" said Patsy curtly.

Bohee hastily joined Dr. Thomas, and the two began walking off hastily in the direction of the town.

CHAPTER XXI.

THE SEQUENCE OF THE STRUGGLE.

WITH great dismay depicted on her pretty face Maizie after Bill Bohee's inglorious defeat watched him slink off with Dr. Thomas.

"Oh, Patsy," she cried, "what have you done?"

"You saw, didn't ye?" he asked. "I licked him all right. You told me if I didn't you'd never speak to me ag'in."

"But I'm afraid of what 'll happen," she said. "Pa 'll be sure to fire you."

"Fire me!" he echoed. "What fur?"

"Why, for nothing," she replied. "That's the way people in the theatrical profession are generally fired. You heard the crack Bill made about his brother Gus and him quitting if pa kept you in the show."

"Aw, he was only bluffin'," said Patsy.

"Even if he was," said Maizie nervously, "I don't think pa's got sand enough to call his bluff. You ought to know by this time just what kind of a man he is. It's all dollars and cents with him, and he thinks he needs the Bohees. They supply the comedy element to the show. If they blew to-night, with all that money in the house, pa would die of housemaid's knees."

"What 'll I do?" he questioned.

"There's only one thing you can do," she said with great firmness. "You've got to marry me!"

"When, Maizie?" he said, taking a deep breath.

"Before we go back to the hotel. Understand, Patsy, I'm doing this just to keep you from being fired. Pa wouldn't have the gall to discharge one of the family."

"No, Maizie," he said hopelessly. "It can't be."

"Why not? Are you already married?"

"I just gotter bean in my pants-pocket," he shamefacedly explained, "an' ye can't git hitched on a bean."

"Why, it takes very little to get married," she said. It's getting divorced that costs."

"But there's the fixin's," he argued. "First ye gotter ante up to the license-clerk an' then there's the gospel-sharp to square."

"Look the other way, Patsy!"

He turned toward the fast disappearing forms of Bill Bohee and Dr. Thomas while she fished from the safe treasury of one of her silk stockings a modest roll.

"All right, Patsy!"

At the cue he wheeled around to witness Maizie's proud exhibition of wealth.

"Why, yer purty well heeled!" he exclaimed.

"You don't suppose I'd bum around with pa without taking a little precaution," she said. "Once when his troop went on the rocks I had a narrow escape from juggling dishes in a hash-foundry."

"I'd be ashamed to take yer money, Maizie."

"Maybe you won't have to, Patsy. We might stall off the license-clerk and minister with passes for the show."

"There's another thing, Maizie. I ain't got no name to marry ye with."

"What was your father's name on the marriage certificate?"

"John H. Smith."

"It's horribly plebian, but it will do in a pinch. You can use that, Patsy."

"I've always steered clear of it because I b'lieved he wasn't on the square."

"How do you know he wasn't? You don't know anything about him, so you ought to give him the benefit of the doubt."

He took from his vest-pocket his mother's wedding ring.

"Here's a ring fur ye, Maizie," he told her, "but I don't know as it 'll do. On the inside it says 'from John to Mary.'"

"Why, what a coincidence!" she exclaimed. "Of course, it 'll do. Maizie's only my nickname. My real one's Mary. It fits the case exactly. Put it on my finger, Patsy."

He did so, and sealed the proceeding with a long, lingering kiss, after which they began to retrace their steps toward the town.

At the municipal building to which they were directed they came into contact with the benign civic authority who with labored scratches of his pen could perform the preliminaries of the mathematical intricacy of dissolving two into one.

"Sure I can grant you a marriage license," that dignitary graciously said, after they had made known their wishes. "It 'll cost you a buck. Some o' the show folks, eh?"

He filled out the paper with the data they supplied, and handed the precious document to Patsy, pocketing his fee with great satisfaction.

"Where kin we find a minister, mister?" asked Patsy.

There were several interested spectators in the clerk's office, and that worthy instantly replied:

"Why, you don't need one. Justice Blodgett here can marry you."

That functionary was not only willing but eager to exercise his offices, and completed the task with neatness and despatch. Hands were extended in congratulation to the happy bride and groom, and a somewhat shabbily attired, weasel-faced young man broke in abruptly:

"I'm a reporter from the *Daily Wheeze,* and I'd like a few details of this, please. Just wait a minute."

He rushed to the telephone, asked for a number, and called out excitedly:

"This is Boggs. Hold the afternoon paper. I've got a terrific news story. I'll hustle with it as soon as I can down to the office."

Then he came back with his note-book in his hand and said:

"Now shoot!"

"I'm Maizie Muggs," said that young lady, with becoming modesty, "daughter of George L. Muggs, the famous minstrel magnate."

"An' I," added Patsy, with equal modesty, "am Harold Evermond, the star feature o' Muggs's Megatharian Minstrels. I don't mind tellin' ye I'm the world's greatest tenor. The music scale, as ye know, of course, runs from A to G, but I kin take in the hull alphabet."

Much more did they freely impart to the gluttonous scribe who jotted it all down with feverish haste.

"Don't forget to say," was Patsy's final injunction, "that I'm agonna sing at Biller's Op'ra House to-night 'Girl o' Mine,' an' it was with this here song I won my wife."

"That's a corking romantic touch," said the reporter with justifiable enthusiasm. "I'll be sure to work it in. And now, if you'll kindly excuse me, I'll beat it to the office."

He took it on the run, and the newly married pair followed him in a more leisurely, dignified manner.

Now that they were cemented together by due process of law they felt rather uneasy over the outcome, and Patsy in particular was highly skeptical about the paternal blessing.

The first ecstatic moments of the honeymoon were spent on one of the benches in the small park that adorned the center of the public square, and here Patsy voiced the fears that were at his heart.

"I wonder how the old man 'll take it," he said dubiously.

"He's either got to take it or leave it," was Maizie's forcible response.

"I wish I hadn't turned down that offer o' Flubb & Dubby," he said. "Maybe he'll kick me out."

"Where you go I will go," she said. "Your people shall be my people."

"That's the trouble, Maizie," he said. "I ain't got no people. There's no one we kin sponge on."

"Don't you worry, Patsy," she said cheerfully. "It 'll all come out in the wash."

They returned at length to the hotel where they separated. At supper when they met again Muggs came in with a copy of the afternoon edition of the *Daily Wheeze,* and took his customary seat at the table.

After greeting them affably he listened to the bill-of-fare patter of the waiter-girl, frowning darkly at the number of cold dishes she glibly rolled off on her tongue. He stated his preferences, and, as she started off, smoothed out the paper to exhume any item relating to his organization.

Almost instantly his eye fastened itself upon an article on the front page which ran as follows:

WOOED, WON, AND WEDDED!

Romantic Marriage at City Hall.

Miss Maizie, Daughter Of Minstrel Magnate Muggs, Bride of Harold Evermond, World's Greatest Tenor.

An event of the greatest importance to the theatrical profession occurred at the City Hall this afternoon when Miss Maizie, daughter of George L. Muggs, the famous minstrel magnate, was united in the holy bonds of matrimony to Harold Evermond, the world's greatest tenor.

Clerk Scullian issued the license, and Justice Ephraim Blodgett performed the ceremony, which was of the simplest nature possible owing to the dislike of the contracting parties for all ostentatious display.

The bride, a beautiful blonde, was attired in a tasteful walking dress. It was noticeable that the groom had several abrasions on his face due, as he explained, to an automobile accident in which he had figured but a short time before.

The Megatharian Minstrels, controlled by Mrs. Evermond's father, will appear at Biller's Opera House to-night, and the house is entirely sold out for the momentous occasion. Mr. Evermond is the star feature of the brilliant organization. The musical scale employs only the first seven letters of the alphabet, and these are enough for all ordinary requirements. Try it on your piano. With his superb voice Mr. Evermond can ascend until he finally reaches Z, which will give a comprehensive idea of his phenomenal register.

Quite a pretty touch of sentiment connected with the union is the fact that the charming bride was first attracted to the lucky groom by his exquisite rendition of the beautiful ballad, "Girl o' Mine." At to-night's performance Mr. Evermond will sing the song that won for him a wife, and he may be depended on to put more feeling and expression into his highly artistic vocalization than ever before.

"Well, I be—" began Muggs, and stopped abruptly, without raising his eyes from the paper.

"What's the matter, pa?" asked Maizie innocently. "Are you reading something interesting?"

"Yes, it's mighty interestin'," was the sarcastic response. "I see by this here paper ye've been an' gone an' done it."

"Got married, you mean?" said Maizie cheerfully. "Oh, yes. I hope you're not sore, pa."

"Ye oughter asked my consent," he said gruffly.

"I have no recollection," said Maizie, "of your asking mine when you married ma."

"If I'd 'a' had the chance," he said, with some bitterness, "it might 'a' saved me payin' alimony."

"You mean of owing it," she gently reminded.

"Come, father-in-law," spoke up Patsy, "be a good feller, an' give us yer blessin'."

CHAPTER XXII.

DIABOLICAL SCHEMING.

THE air with which Muggs regarded his son-in-law was so cold that Patsy suddenly experienced the sensation of being in a refrigerating plant.

"Daughter," said the minstrel manager reproachfully to Maizie, "I thought ye had more sense than to fall fur an ordinary dub. I had hopes you'd grab a millionaire some time."

"Look at it in a bus'ness light, boss," urged Patsy. "Just think o' the money you'll save. It costs less fur a room when two double up, an' after this me an' Maizie 'll only need one instead o' two."

"It's tough," said Muggs regretfully, "but I s'pose I gotter swaller it. What's done can't be undone except by legal shysters whose fees is so cussed expensive they'd take even yer B. V. D.'s. But I'll tell ye right now it's agonna be like a dose o' asafedita to call ye son."

The meal was partaken of in gloomy silence, and the only cheering thought of Muggs was the capacity house awaiting him.

"Come, pa," pleaded Maizie when at last he rose from the table, "don't nurse a grouch. My woman's intuition tells me I've made no mistake in choosing Patsy for my husband. By the way, pa, Patsy's name is John."

"No, his name's Dennis!" said Muggs significantly, as he walked away.

"Now what did he mean by that?" said Patsy, with a rueful face to Maizie.

"I can understand pa's feelings exactly," she said. "This must be a terrible blow to him. Remember, Patsy, he's lost his only daughter."

"Yes, but he's gained a son," insisted Patsy. "An' he may have lots o' little gran'sons an' gran'daughters."

"Patsy," said Maizie, with a blush, "stop!"

The news of the marriage soon became bruited about among the troupe, and Patsy and Maizie were showered with profuse hearty congratulations. In these Dr. Thomas and Bill Bohee ungraciously took no part, and the latter to his fellows was particularly vicious in his denunciations of the groom.

The time for the performance approached, and when the doors of Biller's Opera House were thrown open to the public the rack of the box-office was completely denuded of tickets.

"Sell as many standin'-rooms as you kin," Biller instructed his treasurer. "We'll pack 'em in back to the walls."

Simply to wet the appetite of the populace the band got out on the street before the entrance blazing with electric-lights and rendered some tantalizing, ear-tickling jazz numbers.

The crowd began to pour into the lobby, and the line of people at the box-office window extended out into the street. The treasurer shoved out pasteboards good for standing-room only, for which he raked in over the sill fifty-cents per capita.

Muggs and Biller sat in the manager's office complacently puffing away at Perfectos, the latter's hospitable offering, when a fireman made his appearance in the doorway.

"Say, Mr. Biller," he began, "ye better tell yer treasurer to stop sellin' standin'-room. They're jammed in so tight now they kin hardly move. Yer a violatin' the fire laws."

"Here, take these," said Biller, shoving a bunch of cigars into the man's hand. "Jest do yer best gittin' 'em to move closer. We gotter make hay while the sun shines."

Scarcely had the fireman departed when Wilkins, all blacked up and ready to go on, took his place.

"It's time to ring in, Mr. Muggs," he announced.

"Well, why don't ye?" asked Muggs rather testily.

"There's trouble back on the stage."

"Trouble! What trouble?"

"The Bohee Brothers won't go on!"

"They won't!" echoed Muggs. "What's the matter?"

"You'd better come back," advised Wilkins. "Bill Bohee wants to speak to you."

Just then there came an impatient clapping of hands and stamping of feet on the part of the audience which caused Muggs to rise and glance at his watch.

It was past the time set for the opening of the performance, and he quickly followed Wilkins back to the stage, wondering uneasily all the while why Bohee had caused the delay.

Led by Wilkins he made his way to one of the large dressing-rooms where the two Bohees, still in white face and street-attire, were surrounded by a group of fellow artists who were pleading and arguing with them in turn.

"Look here, Bill!" he angrily demanded. "What's this I hear about you an' yer brother Gus refusin' to go on?"

"Don't git so high an' mighty, Muggs," retorted Bill. "Ye can't put nothin' over on me an' Gus. We're both agonna leave ye flat."

"I asked ye a civil question," said Muggs more mildly. "Why are you delayin' the performance?"

"Say, Muggs, we know jest how we stand," returned Bill confidently. "Me an' Gus in our cross-fire 's the hit o' the show. We hog all the laughs, an' if we wasn't there with the goods it'd die on its feet. Ye can't do without us, Muggs."

"I don't wanter, Bill," said Muggs. "Come, be a good feller, an' hustle inter yer togs. If ye got anything on yer chest we'll fix things up to-morrer."

"No, we gotter fix 'em up right now," said Bill determinedly. "Fire that mutt

Evermond or me an' Gus don't go on ter-night. Do ye git me, Muggs? The show ain't big enough to hold him an' us."

Patsy all blacked up, and in his ill-fitting dress-suit, with glistening celluloid shirt-front and collar, was listening as were others of the troupe most intently.

Turning slightly he noticed Maizie standing in the open doorway. Divining that there was some trouble, and vaguely fearing that Patsy might in some way be connected with it, she had followed her father to the rear of the house.

"Say, pa," she called out indignantly to him, "are you going to let that great big stiff pull such raw stuff as that and get away with it?"

He paid no attention to her outburst, but addressed Bill placatingly.

"Come, Bill," he urged, "be reasonable. Ye wouldn't leave me flat like this, would ye? Think o' the S. R. O. house out there! Why, I betcher there's near nine hundred dollars. Be a good feller, an' black up."

"Ye heard me," was Bill's sullen response, "an' what I said goes. Is that right, Gus?"

"Yes," said his brother somewhat hesitatingly.

"An' ye insist on me firin' my son-in-law instanter," said Muggs, as if trying to grasp the enormity of the other's demand. "I gotter give one o' my own fam'ly the rinky-dink!"

"That's right!" said Bill.

Patsy could hold his outraged feelings in check no longer.

"Look here, father-in-law," he broke in, "ya don't seem able to handle this situation. Maybe I kin settle it."

"What kin you do?" sneered Bill.

"Ye big slob," said Patsy, in a cold, deadly tone, "I nearly strangled ye to death this afternoon. If ye don't stop beefin' I'm agonna begin where I left off, an' finish the job. Yes, an' I'll prepare yer brother Gus fur the undertaker with ye. Just let that soak in yer gizzard. Black up an' git in yer clo'es! I'll give ye just five secun's to make up yer mind, an', if ye don't, it's good night, nurse!"

There was an unmistakable purpose in his voice and manner, and he took out his watch, while Bill kept his eye on him as though he were fascinated.

"One—two—three—four—" counted off Patsy, but before he reached five Bill turned to Muggs, and said hurriedly and excitedly:

"I'll go on. I don't wanner leave ye in a hole, gov'nor."

"Ye bet ye'll go on," said Patsy intimidatingly, "an' so'll brother Gus. If ye try to crab the show it 'll be all day with ye. You an' Gus git just sixteen laughs, Bill—I've kep' tab on 'em. If ye don't git twenty ter-night I'll knock the everlastin' tar outer ye both!"

Within five minutes the performance was in full swing, and when the time came for the Bohee Brothers' comedy exhibit it was remarked by other members of the troupe that they had never worked better. Roars of laughter greeted their moth-eaten quips and sallies, and Patsy kept careful count of all of them.

Out in the manager's office Muggs and Biller counted up the night's receipts which reached the very pleasing figure of eight hundred and sixty-five dollars.

With rare good humor Muggs pocketed his share at 65-35 per cent after a few minor expenses had been deducted. He had no doubt that all further friction with the turbulent Bohees could be averted, and reports from his advance agent Sniper, that excellent business was awaiting them in towns further along the route put him in a very cheerful frame of mind.

He was flush with money, so he determined upon a little impromptu celebration of his daughter's marriage.

Arrangements were made by telephone with a café in the neighborhood for a spread after the performance to which all the company and Mr. Biller, the local manager, were invited.

The only ones missing at the banquet which was a feast of reason and a flow of soul punctuated by frequent enthusiastic toasts to the bride and groom were Dr. Thomas and the Bohees.

The doctor had not attended the performance that night, but had remained at the hotel where he was joined by the

Bohees immediately after they had washed up.

While Bill was vindictively narrating to him in the hotel-office what had occurred at the theater a telegraph-boy approached.

"I gotter telegram fur Mr. Harold Evermond," he announced. "Where kin I find the gent?"

"You can give it to me," said Dr. Thomas. "I'll sign for it."

The boy did so, and went on his way. The flap of the envelope was insecurely sealed, and the doctor began lightly fingering it.

"I wonder what it's about," he said curiously.

"Why don't ye open it an' see?" suggested Bill. "Ye kin bet he's up to some dirty work."

Under the doctor's deft manipulation of touch the flap gave way, and he removed the telegram from the envelope. Unfolding it he scanned the contents while his face depicted the utmost consternation and surprise.

The telegram read:—

> Lakeville, September 15.
>
> HAROLD EVERMOND,
> Muggs's Megatharian Minstrels,
> Factoryville.
>
> Amazed by your communication. Will come to see you at Grantville. Important we should meet.
>
> J. HERBERT SMITH.

His hand holding the paper shook like a leaf and his whole manner was so agitated that Bill was prompted to ask:

"What's wrong? Ye act as if ye had bad news."

"It is bad news," said Dr. Thomas blankly. "The telegram's from my half-brother, Mr. Smith."

"Why does it rattle ye so?"

"He's coming to Grantville to-morrow to see Evermond."

"Well, why should that give ye the willies?"

"Look here, Bill," said Dr. Thomas desperately, "I'm going to confide in you. This fellow Evermond's been trying to undermine me with my half-brother. He's got a paper in his possession I must obtain somehow. I've got to prevent him from meeting Mr. Smith. Evermond's done you dirt too. Maybe you can help me."

"I'll do all I kin," said Bill, gritting his teeth. "I wanter git even with him."

"I know some one over in Grantville I can thoroughly rely on," said Dr. Thomas. "I've done a big favor for him, so he can't very well go back on me. If you'll help me I'll make it worth your while. I've been stalling Muggs along with a proposition to buy into his bum minstrel show, and I've got five hundred dollars about me. If you'll pull off this thing with me the money's yours and you'll have a friend for life."

"What is it ye want pulled off?" asked Bill.

"Come up to my room," said Dr. Thomas, "where we can talk alone."

They went up-stairs together, and when they were in his apartment the first thing the doctor did was to tear up into tiny bits the telegram sent by his half-brother to Patsy and cast them into the waste-basket.

The banqueting in honor of the bride and groom continued hilariously until a late hour, and all the while the doctor and Bill were concocting an infamous scheme to Patsy's undoing.

CHAPTER XXIII.

THE TRAP ALL SET.

GOOD business has an exhilarating effect upon every one connected with a theatrical organization, for it augurs the prompt payment of salaries, so that all the members of Muggs's Megatharian Minstrels were in gay spirits when they departed for Grantville on the following morning.

Even Bill Bohee after his bluff of the night before, which Patsy had promptly called, hid all trace of rancor, and apparently was as cheerful as the rest, who carefully avoided him, and forced his companionship on his brother Gus and the doctor.

At heart both Bohees felt their positions with Muggs were in jeopardy, for Bill had tried to put him in a hole. To all appearances the manager had condoned the offense, but it was questionable whether he would not replace them with other talent at the first opportunity.

Nevertheless Bill was in an excellent humor brought about by something entirely apart from the business. He had conceived a violent hatred for Patsy, and the doctor had unfolded to him a villainous scheme by which he could get even.

All unconscious of the evil thoughts that poisoned the minds of Bill and the doctor, Patsy and Maizie were in the car behind the smoker in which nearly all the troupe were congregated, billing and cooing like turtle-doves.

" I wonder why I ain't heard from Mr. Smith about the marriage certificate," he said to her.

" Why, you only sent it to him yesterday," she reminded him. " He hasn't had time to acknowledge it yet."

" That's so," he said, looking relieved. " I was afraid it might 'a' got lost. Maizie, yer pa scooped in a big bunch o' the long green last night."

" Yes, and you can bet he'll keep it," she said. " The only thing that can wean pa away from his roll is an overplaced confidence in three of a kind or a straight."

" He ain't even peeped about that money I lent him," said Patsy, with a strong tinge of regret.

" I'm afraid it's cold turkey, Patsy," said Maizie sympathetically.

" Yes, but I'm a married man now an' I got my obligations," he said. " What he owes me would buy my wife a lot o' nut sundaes."

In the smoker Muggs and Dr. Thomas were talking apart from the rest.

" When are ye gonna make up yer mind to buy inter the show?" the manager asked.

" I'm very favorably impressed with the proposition," returned the doctor. " That capacity house last night about decided me. I'm thinking strongly of accepting your offer."

" One thousand five hundred dollars fur a half-int'rest is dirt cheap," said Muggs. " Ye'd git it back in a few weeks. From now on ev'rything 'll be smooth sailin'. All the towns booked is good, an' the Megatharians stand to clean up a pot o' money."

The conversation continued in a like strain, and the doctor led the manager to believe that he had fully made up his mind to become his partner.

There was abundant reason for the optimism of Muggs as far as Grantville was concerned.

This town, or more properly speaking city, was a flourishing manufacturing center of some sixty thousand population, much larger than the stands which Muggs with his somewhat inferior organization had the temerity to book.

It boasted of four amusement edifices, two of which were devoted entirely to moving pictures, among them Hendrick's Opera House, a modern theater seating one thousand five hundred that had just been opened to the public.

Only two attractions had appeared in this handsome new up-to-date structure, in which the local management owing to the scarcity of good attractions had contracted with the Megatharians for two nights and a matinee. As the last of these happened to be Saturday the prospects looked exceedingly inviting.

The train pulled in at Grantville, and the party hastily gathered together their belongings and made an exodus from the cars.

Much to his surprise Muggs recognized among the crowd at the station platform the Quigley Twins, the most prominent attraction of the rival Milliken's Mastodons.

" Hello, boys!" he greeted them rather uneasily. " What are ye doin' in Grantville? The show ain't booked here to-night at the other house, is it?"

" Nope," said Tom Quigley in a lugubrious tone. " It blew up last night over in Bunktown. The ghost ain't walked fur two weeks."

Adversity to others concerned in the show-business always has an enlivening effect upon the average manager, so that Muggs said with great elation:

" That's good. I knowed I'd put that nut Milliken on the bum. I tell ye, they're all a waitin' fur the Megatharians."

" Me an' Tom," said Ed Quigley, " took a chance, an' hopped a train to Grantville. We thought maybe you could use us, gov'-nor."

The Quigley Twins were rated in the

minstrel profession as far superior performers to the Bohee Brothers. With the twins added to his organization Muggs at once realized that not only would they impart strength to the performance but he could use them as the whip-end in any future trouble with the mischief-making Bohees. If it came to a showdown he could summarily discharge the latter without feeling their loss.

" I'm full up, boys," he said diplomatically, " but if ye'll make yer salary an inducement I might be tempted to take ye on."

Then ensued some dickering about terms, in which the Quigleys finally gave way, and Tom said with a groan:

" That's twenty a week less 'n we ever took before. But we're up against it, gov'nor, an' gotter git to work."

The Bohees noticed Muggs and the Quigley Twins in earnest consultation, and Gus was uneasy in consequence.

" That's what ye git fur bein' fresh," he complained bitterly to Bill. " He's wired 'em to come on, an' he's gonna fire us. If he does, it's a long walk back to New York."

" Aw, cut it out!" said Bill in disgust. " There won't be no walkin'. You stick to me, bo, an' we'll both wear di'mun's."

Dr. Thomas quickly approached them.

" Come on, Bill," he said. " There's no time to lose. We've got to get busy."

Bill and he quickened their pace up the street toward the business section of the town while Gus disconsolately followed on alone.

Patsy was ready to assist Jones with the baggage as usual, but the latter said kindly:

" That's all right, kid. I kin attend to it. Just you trot along with yer wife."

At the Stafford House where they had been quartered, Patsy some time later watched Maizie remove from her grip those little toilet accessories dear to the feminine heart and arrange them conveniently on the dresser. While they chatted, and he puffed contentedly at a cigarette, they heard a knock, and he opened the door.

A bell-boy outside handed him an envelope.

" District messenger brought it," he announced briefly. " Said it was to be delivered to you immediately."

Patsy broke open the envelope and read:

> Come at once to the Ravine House. Don't fail me. Am waiting for you.
>
> J. Herbert Smith.

" What is it, Patsy?" asked Maizie.

" It's from Mr. Smith," he replied, " an' he wants me to come an' see him at the Ravine House. I wonder where it is."

The boy had already gone so that he could not satisfy himself on this point.

" I suppose it's some other hotel in the town," said Maizie. " You'd better go at once, Patsy."

" But I can't, Maizie," he objected. " I gotter be in the parade. The boys is gittin' ready fur it now."

" Cut it," she said. " I'll tell pa, and he'll excuse you."

She overcame his scruples, and he seized his hat, and left her with a kiss. At the desk in the office he asked the clerk for information about the Ravine House.

" It's a road-house about two miles out of town," said the clerk.

He spoke in a derogatory tone, accompanying his remark with a shrug of his shoulders, so that Patsy involuntarily asked:

" What's wrong with it? Ain't it got a good name?"

" I've heard some queer stories about it," went on the clerk. " A fellow named Cook who came over here from Lakeville runs it. He opened it up just a few months ago, and they say it's a pretty tough joint."

Patsy thought it strange that any one of Mr. Smith's high standing should choose a place of such bad repute for their meeting, but the fact that the person who conducted it came from Lakeville, where Mr. Smith had his home, might put another phase on the matter which undoubtedly he could satisfactorily explain.

" How kin I git to it?" he asked.

" It's a pretty stiff walk if you're going to leg it," was the response. " You go past the court-house, and take the Mendham road. Just keep on walking till you come to it."

Patsy felt that he could not afford an

automobile, so he started off determined to accomplish the distance on foot.

He had been gone about a half-hour when Maizie in their room again heard a knock on the door. Upon opening it she saw the same bell-boy.

" There's a gentleman waiting to see you down in the parlor," he said. " He sent up his card."

Maizie took it and read:

MR. J. HERBERT SMITH

"Tell him I'll be right down," she instructed.

She added a few little becoming touches to her toilet and descended to the big dingy parlor where Mr. Smith was looking out of one of the windows.

" Ah, my dear young lady," he said as he wrung her hand, " I'm delighted to meet you again! I asked for Mr. Evermond, but the clerk told me he was out. He mentioned that his wife was up in the room. Is it possible you two young folks have married since I last saw you?"

" Yes," said Maizie with a blush.

A strange look that almost seemed like resignation to her came into Mr. Smith's face.

" Well," he said gallantly, " he certainly could not have shown better taste. But where is your husband, may I ask?"

" Why, he's gone out to the Ravine House to meet you," was Maizie's surprised answer.

" To the Ravine House!" echoed Mr. Smith, equally surprised. " Where is that?"

" I don't know," said Maizie, bewildered by the other's words. " Didn't you write him a note a short time ago asking him to meet you there?"

" Why, no," said Mr. Smith. " I wrote no such note, and am entirely ignorant of such a place. What I did send was a telegram from Lakeville last night to Factoryville telling him I'd meet him here."

" He never got it," said Maizie.

" You astound me!" ejaculated Mr. Smith. " Have you the note purporting to be mine?"

" It's up in my room," she said. " I'll go and get it."

She fairly flew up the stairs on her errand. When she returned with the note Mr. Smith was nervously pacing up and down.

As he held the paper before him and ran his eye over its context he gave a sudden start and his hand trembled.

" What's the matter?" asked Maizie in alarm.

" It's not my handwriting, but I recognize whose it is," said Mr. Smith agitatedly. " My dear girl, we must go out to the Ravine House at once. There's crooked work going on. I'm afraid Patsy's in great danger."

CHAPTER XXIV.

OVER THE CLIFF.

THE trap was cunningly set, and Dr. Thomas felt pretty sure that Patsy would swallow the bait.

After the unscrupulous doctor had written the note asking Patsy to come to the Ravine House, and signed his half-brother's name to it, he went with Bill Bohee to the local telegraph office, where he arranged to have it delivered.

The office was in the proximity of Hendrick's Opera House, and as they came out several members of the troupe passed them.

" Hurry up, Bill!" called out Banks Gilgan. " The boys are already formin' fur the parade."

" I'm a comin'," said Bill gruffly, and Dr. Thomas added in a low voice:

" Let 'em whistle! We've got other fish to fry!"

At a neighboring garage the doctor secured an automobile, and when they were in the machine gave instructions to the chauffeur to take them to the Ravine House.

" Purty tough joint," the man voluntarily commented as he started off. " The police talk about closin' it up."

" We're not going there on pleasure," Dr. Thomas hastened to explain. " We've got a little business matter to attend to with the man who runs it."

"You gotter look out fur that feller," warned the chauffeur. "They say he'll stop at nothin'."

Out they rolled into the country looking its loveliest in its autumnal dyes of crimson, red, and gold.

All the way it was a steady up-hill climb until they came to the Ravine House, which, as far as location was concerned, was certainly picturesque.

The building, a rambling frame structure surrounded by wide porches, was fast going to decay. Some of its shingles had dropped off, and it was badly in need of paint. It stood on an eminence quite a distance from the road, being partly hidden by a luxuriant growth of trees and shrubbery, into which dank weeds had crept and flourished.

One side of the place almost overhung the cliff of the ravine from which it took its name, and there was a steep descent of perhaps a hundred feet to the bottom of the gorge, along which a tiny stream trickled on its way. In times of continued rains this was swollen to a turbulent, racing flood, but now it was the merest thread.

When they came in sight of the house Dr. Thomas ordered the chauffeur to stop, and jumped from the machine, followed quickly by Bohee.

"We won't require you further," he told the man. "We shall be some time here."

"Hadn't I better wait?" asked the chauffeur. "If I don't you'll have to walk back."

"We'd rather," said the doctor. "We want the exercise."

He paid the price agreed upon for the rent of the automobile, adding a generous tip, and, turning the machine around, the man started on his homeward way. Once he looked back curiously, as though wondering what their business was.

The doctor started toward the house with a confident stride, as though he knew his ground, but Bill, as he walked beside him, seemed rather ill at ease.

"Say, this is a spooky kind o' place!" he expressed himself. "I wouldn't care to come here alone on a dark night! What sorter a guy is this man Cook who runs it?"

"You heard the bad name that chauffeur gave him," said the doctor. "Well, I guess he's earned it by good, conscientious deviltry. I turned a little trick over in Lakeville some months ago that saved him from the pen, and he ought to be properly grateful. I could send him up, even now, for a long term if I wished."

He did not enter into further details, leaving Bohee to speculate upon the nature of Cook's offense.

They crossed the rotting planks of the porch, and the doctor banged loudly on the door. But no response was made to his reiterated thumps, and there was no evidence of life about the lonely place.

"It seems to be deserted," said Bill at last. "I guess no one's here."

"Wait a minute," said the doctor. "We'll walk around the sides of the porch."

They started, and, looking through one of the windows, Bill suddenly glimpsed an evil-looking face stealthily peering out at them. The sight of Dr. Thomas must have reassured its owner, for almost immediately afterward the shuffle of feet echoed along the bare, empty hall, a key was turned in a lock and a door was flung open.

A man with a dirty, unshaven face, who was the direct antithesis of prepossessing, in rough blue flannel shirt and trousers, the latter of which were frayed and out at the seat, surveyed them suspiciously from the doorway.

"Hello, Cook!" Dr. Thomas greeted him.

"Why, hello, doc!" returned the man, looking at him in great surprise. "What are ye doin' over here in Grantville?"

"I came on business, and you can help me," said the doctor. "How have you been making out since I saw you last?"

"Rotten!" said Cook gruffly. "Everything's goin' to the dogs around here. When I took the place the owner said he'd make some repairs. Well, he ain't made good, but maybe that's because he's got no rent. He wants to dispossess me, but I'm a gonna save him the trouble an' fly the coop to-morrer!"

"Where's your wife?" the doctor asked.

"I've sent her back to Lakeville," said

Cook. "We've stripped the place of ev'rything worth takin'. I thought we could git some automobile trade, but they've given the place a wide berth."

"No wonder," said the doctor. "Why, man, it would take some thousands of dollars to make it attractive. But this is my friend Bohee. I forgot to introduce you."

"Won't you come in?" invited Cook. "I guess there's still a shot in the locker, though the excise people's been after me an' took away my license. What little patronage I've had 's been from a few drunks an' bums, an' all they've done is to put me on the blink!"

He led the way through the empty hall into a room where there was a bar, behind which he delved and brought forth a black bottle and three not overclean glasses.

The three in turn poured quantities of whisky varying to their desires into their respective glasses, and, raising his, the doctor said:

"Well, here's good luck! I mentioned I wanted your assistance, Cook."

"What do ye want me to do, doc?" he asked after they had drained the glasses.

"My half-brother, Mr. Smith, is over here in Grantville too."

"Did he come with you?"

"No, he came to meet a young chap who calls himself Evermond, and we've got to prevent it somehow."

"Why do ye say we?"

"I've sent a decoy note to this fellow Evermond, which will undoubtedly bring him here in a short while. He'll come, expecting to meet my half-brother You've got to keep him here till Mr. Smith leaves Grantville."

"Well, you gotter nerve!" ejaculated Cook. "You'd have the cops down on me like a swarm o' hornets. I wanner make a gitaway with my skin an' yer fixin' to have me pinched."

"Nonsense!" said Dr. Thomas irritably. "All you've got to do is to keep him here till I can get my half-brother out of town. There's not the slightest risk in that. Remember, Cook, you'd be in the pen now if it wasn't for me."

"Say, doc," cried Cook, glowering at him, "you was just as deep in that hole as I was If they'd sent me up you'd 'a' gone with me."

"We won't discuss it," said Dr. Thomas, frowning. "Just you help me, Cook, and I'll make it well worth your while. If I'm any judge, you might use a couple of hundred dollars just now to advantage."

"I could use it all right," said Cook, "but not if they nabbed me an' put me in jail."

"Let's go outside and talk," said the doctor. "The air in here is close and musty."

Cook opened the rear door of the hall and they went out on the back porch, which, like the rest of the house, showed stress of age and wind and weather. It extended partly over the ravine, being supported by heavy wooden beams, with the protection of a railing.

In one place the guard had snapped in twain, and the planks in general seemed insecure to the tread. Dr. Thomas stepped gingerly out toward the edge and looked over down into the ravine.

"What a fearful place!" he said, drawing back with a shudder. "I shouldn't care to promenade here on a dark night. Think of taking a plunge into the gully!"

Just then there came an insistent knocking on the front door.

"Sh!" warned Cook. "Let me spot who it is."

"It's the chap I was speaking of," said Dr. Thomas hurriedly. "Go to the front door, Cook, and let him in. When he asks for Mr. Smith bring him here."

In a hesitating manner Cook walked the length of the hall and opened the front door. The doctor and Bohee withdrew to a side of the porch, where they were screened from observation, and listened intently.

They heard a voice, which both recognized as Patsy's, raised in inquiry, and then Cook's response, after which came the tread of footsteps toward them.

Cook led his unsuspecting victim out to the back porch until he came in sight of the doctor and Bohee.

"So it's a plant, eh?" cried Patsy angrily to Dr. Thomas. "It was you who wrote that note to me."

"Yes," acknowledged the other brazenly. "I did it at Mr. Smith's instigation. He doesn't want to be troubled with you again. You've got a ring and marriage-certificate in your possession. Give them to me or it will be the worse for you."

"My wife is wearin' the ring," said Patsy.

"Then turn over the certificate instantly," ordered the doctor. "You've got that, you hound!"

"No, I ain't, either," said Patsy coolly. "Yer half-brother's got it. I sent it to him after you tried to steal it from me that night in Jalap."

His words transformed the doctor into a fiend, and with a snarl of rage he sprang upon Patsy and grappled with him. Locked in each other's fierce embrace they struggled while Bohee and Cook looked on.

Passion lent to the doctor a false strength that was all the more terrible, and in his ungovernable fury he backed Patsy closer and closer to the edge of the porch, hurling him against the railing, which, to the horror of the watchers, suddenly gave way.

Intuitively as they were about to plunge over into the chasm, Patsy reached out and grasped the baluster of the railing. As it crashed to the support of the porch he held on and desperately worked himself hand over hand on the supporting beams to a place of safety under the planking where he was hid from sight.

But his assailant had not been so fortunate, and Patsy, shaking like a leaf, recalled the confused vision of the flash of a human form hurtling through space.

He made no outcry, fearing still the treachery of those directly above him, and he lay absolutely still as they drew close to the porch's edge and gazed over.

"I guess that's the end of 'em both!" said Bill Bohee in a hard, dry tone.

CHAPTER XXV.

FATHER AND SON.

BOTH Bohee and Cook peered cautiously from the porch down into the ravine. The tragedy just witnessed by them had happened in a trice, and they were appalled by its terrible climax. There had been no time to prevent it, even if they had been inclined to do so.

The dense growth of weeds and shrubbery at the bottom, as well as a stunted tree which shot out its thick branches slantingly from a side of the cliff, hid what they strained their eyes to discover, and there was no evidence of what had occurred.

"I can't see either of 'em," announced Cook at last, "but they're goners, all right. That fall must 'a' killed 'em."

"Let's not look over any more," said Bohee. "It makes me sick at the stomach."

They withdrew to a place of absolute security, and Bill added:

"Well, I guess I'll beat it!"

"You'll what?" cried Cook in a forbidding tone.

"Beat it!" repeated Bohee rather nervously. "I can't do no good stayin' here."

"Say, you'll stick with me," announced Cook very decidedly. "Yer not gonna do yer dirty work an' let me shoulder all the blame. Ye know mighty well I didn't have nothin' to do with either o' their deaths."

"Neither had I," said Bohee with haste. "They brought 'em on themselves."

"I ain't so sure o' that," said Cook dryly. "That young feller was attacked by Doc Thomas. He was lured here, an' you had a hand in the game. In the eyes o' the law yer an accomplice, an' ye stand to git a good stiff term for murder!"

"Murder!" echoed Bill blankly. "Why, what are ye talkin' about? It was an accident. But whatever it was I didn't have nothin' to do with it. I'm as innocent as a unborn child."

"Maybe ye'll have to tell that to the judge," said Cook in a sarcastic tone. "Ye ain't fool enough, are ye, to s'pose this is the end of it all? Why, the police may be here any time to put us both on the griddle. You gotter make a clean breast o' the whole affair an' clear me."

"Yes, but you gotter clear me too," insisted Bill. "If I stick to you, you must stick to me. We both kin swear it was an accident. They got in a fight an' fell over. That's all there's to it. Neither of us had nothin' to do with it."

"Well, my advice to you is to hang aroun'," said Cook, and there was a veiled threat in his words. "There ain't no use in us a chewin' the rag. What we'd better do is to hustle down to the bottom o' the ravine an' see just what's happened."

"How'll we git there?" asked Bill.

"There's a path leadin' down the side o' the hill," replied Cook. "You foller me—an' don't ye try to skip out. If ye do, it'll go hard with ye."

He led the way around the porch, and as they came to the front of the house a big touring-car speeded up the driveway and was brought to an abrupt stop before the steps.

"There's some one now," said Cook. "I wonder who it is."

From the car Mr. Smith hastily alighted, and, without waiting for the assistance of his proffered hand, Maizie sprang out after him.

The parties advanced toward each other, and Mr. Smith gave a slight start when he recognized Cook, regarding him with an air of great displeasure.

"I didn't expect to find you here, Cook," he said severely. "What are you doing—up to your same old tricks?"

"I'm just tryin' to make an honest livin', Mr. Smith," replied Cook with something like a whine in his voice. "I've been a runnin' straight ever since I left Lakeville."

Meanwhile Maizie was regarding Bohee with suspicion.

"Where's Patsy?" she asked.

"Don't look at me that way, Maizie," he remonstrated. "Honest to goodness, I didn't have nothin' to do with it. Whatever happened 's up to the doc!"

"You mean Dr. Thomas?" said Mr. Smith. "Then he's been here?"

"Yes," was Bill's response. "He came to meet Evermond."

"You lie!" charged Maizie. "Patsy was inveigled here, thinking he was to meet Mr. Smith."

"I dunno nothin' about that," said Bill brazenly. "All I know is they met."

"Where are they now?" asked Mr. Smith.

"If you'll come with me, Mr. Smith," said Cook, "I'll show ye just how it happened. Me an' Bohee here wasn't to blame in the least. It was all over before we could do anything."

"Good Heavens, man," said Mr. Smith with a sinking of his heart, "what are you talking about? What do you mean?"

With an uneasy foreboding of some dire calamity he suffered Cook and Bohee to lead him to the scene of the recent occurrence, and Maizie, with her heart beating wildly, kept close at his side.

One glance at the broken railing increased the fears he felt, but even before he could voice them Cook said:

"Yer see, it was this way: The young man an' the doctor got fightin' out here on the porch. They grappled with each other an' struck the railin', which bu'sted, so over they went inter the gully. That's the honest truth, an' me an' Bohee here had no hand in their deaths!"

"Oh, my God!" groaned Mr. Smith in utter horror. "Then I've come too late."

"He's dead!" cried Maizie with a frenzied shriek. "My poor, dear, darling Patsy's dead! Oh, why did I ever let him go out of my sight? I should have come with him. Patsy's dead! My poor, poor Patsy's dead!"

A flood of bitter tears succeeded her passionate outburst, and all just then were suddenly electrified by a hollow, sepulchral voice which seemed to come to them from their very feet:

"Stop blubberin', Maizie! Yer tears are fallin' through the cracks o' the planks an' gittin' me all wet. I ain't got no use fur an undertaker yet!"

"It's Patsy!" cried Maizie in a paroxysm of joy. "He's alive!"

"Of course I'm alive," said Patsy. "I'm under the porch."

Mr. Smith shared Maizie's unbounded delight, and even Bohee and Cook, with the shadow of prison bars looming before them, seemed immeasurably relieved.

"He must 'a' grabbed the railin' as he went over," explained Cook. "It was a lucky thing fur him it was hinged to the porch. That's all that saved him."

"Git somethin' to pry up some o' the planks," came Patsy's voice from below. "I wanner come out."

They did as he directed and removed enough of the planking to admit of his egress. Up he came none the worse for his thrilling experience, and Maizie hugged him ecstatically to her heart, kissing him again and again.

When she finally released him, Mr. Smith impulsively threw his arms around him, saying in a tremulous, broken voice:

"My dear, dear boy, I have every reason to believe that you're my son!"

His words were so astounding that Patsy was dumfounded, and Maizie looked at the speaker incredulously.

"Yer what?" gasped Patsy, not believing his ears.

"My son!" repeated Mr. Smith with firm conviction. "If the marriage certificate you sent to me belonged to your mother, then I'm your father!"

Patsy released himself from the other's embrace with a manner of such repulsion that Mr. Smith looked pained and shocked beyond measure.

"Patsy!" cried Maizie reproachfully.

"Why, it can't be," said Patsy to Mr. Smith with a little nervous laugh. "You've made a mistake, that's all. If you'll look at the certificate you'll see that my father's name was John H. Smith. Yers is Herbert."

"John is my first name, and the H. is the initial of my second—Herbert," explained Mr. Smith. "Mary Graham was my wife."

"How stupid of me not to see it!" broke in Maizie. "When I looked at the certificate it never occurred to me."

"Well, maybe it's so," said Patsy slowly and almost regretfully to Mr. Smith, "but we mustn't waste any more time here. We oughter git down to the bottom o' the ravine to see just what's happened to yer half-brother. It might be he wasn't killed."

They started off at his suggestion, and he added to the others:

"Just go ahead, an' me an' Mr. Smith 'll join yer. I wanner speak to him alone."

When the rest were some distance in advance Mr. Smith said:

"I noticed that you called me Mr. Smith. Does any doubt still exist in your mind that you are my son?"

"No," said Patsy.

"Then why did you not call me father?"

"Ye know my mother's dead, don't ye?" demanded Patsy fiercely.

"Yes," said Mr. Smith in a broken voice.

"Why did ye let her die in the poorhouse?"

"The poorhouse!"

"Yes, that's where my mother died after I was born there. That's why, when I grew up, I wouldn't take the name o' Smith because, whoever my father was, I hated him! The man who'd desert a woman when she needed him most is a dirty, contemptible scoundrel; an' if yer my father, as you say, then I won't have nothin' to do with ye. You kin take all yer millions an' do what you please with 'em, but don't you never have the nerve to call me son!"

"You stun me with your reproaches, but before Heaven they are undeserved!"

"Then how was it she had to go to the poorhouse?" asked Patsy.

"I don't know," replied Mr. Smith in helpless, piteous tones. "But let's hurry to Dr. Thomas. We can discuss this afterward. Somehow I have a feeling that he still lives. I can't bring myself to believe that God would let him die before he confesses all, for I am fully convinced that he has done me an irreparable wrong!"

They hastily overtook the others, and Cook led them down a path on the side of the steep hill to the bottom of the ravine, directly underneath the porch.

Nearly hidden by the thick growth of weeds on which it rested was the inanimate form of Dr. Thomas with blood still gushing from an ugly wound on his forehead.

Mr. Smith at once knelt down and felt the doctor's heart.

"It still beats!" he announced with a sigh of great relief.

CHAPTER XXVI.

IN THE HOSPITAL ROOM.

MR. SMITH'S intelligence brought a feeling of great relief to all, for, despicable a character as Dr. Thomas had proved to be, there were reasons not altogether disinterested why they should wish no harm to befall him.

With the doctor still alive, Bohee and Cook realized that they stood a good chance of being extricated from an ugly scrape, for with his recovery the unsavory matter in which they had figured would doubtless be dropped.

Since the unconscious man's villainous schemes had met with crushing failure. and his duplicity was exposed, Mr. Smith was confident that he could wring from him certain disclosures that would clear up what now to him was a complete mystery.

For years he had been unfailing in his affection for his unscrupulous half-brother, whom he had trusted implicitly. He had been most generous in all money affairs, and there was no tangible reason why all his kindness should be so illy requited.

"He must 'a' lit in the tree," said Cook. "He got that gash in his head from one o' the big branches. Anyhow, he owes his life to the tree."

Maizie ripped off her linen skirt and tore it into strips. The tiny stream flowed on close at hand, and, soaking one of the strips in the water, she washed with it the blood from the doctor's forehead. Then she bound the wound tightly with another of the strips.

Under her gentle ministrations Dr. Thomas stirred uneasily, and at last opened his eyes, which rested guiltily upon Mr. Smith bending over him.

"Herbert!" he murmured, and relapsed into unconsciousness again.

"We must get him to a hospital at once," said Mr. Smith decidedly.

The men lifted the doctor in their arms, and with some difficulty bore him up the steep hillside to the automobile, on one of whose wide seats he was laid.

"Quick!" said Mr. Smith to the chauffeur. "Drive as fast as you can to a hospital. Jump in, Maizie and Patsy."

"Kin I ride back with ye, boss?" asked Bohee.

"Not much you can't!" said Patsy firmly. "My advice to you, Bohee, is to beat it, an' never show yer dirty face ag'in. If ye do ye'll git in trouble."

They whirred off, while Bohee and Cook stood sullenly watching them. As they swiftly disappeared from sight the former said:

"We're big suckers, Cook! We oughter got to the doc first an' frisked his pockets when no one was lookin'."

"Do ye think he had much of a roll?"

"He made a crack about havin' five hundred dollars."

"Gee whiz!" said Cook covetously. "An' to think we let it git away from us!"

"All I know is I'm on the bum!" said Bill lugubriously. "After what's happened Muggs 'll wash me up. Me an' brother Gus won't be able to git outer town."

"To hades with you an' yer brother Gus!" cried Cook in a brutal tone. "Now you beat it, just like that young feller said. If ye don't I'll give ye somethin' to start ye!"

Bill needed no second urging, but at once began to move hastily off in the direction of the town.

Within five minutes the automobile had reached Grantville, and a chance pedestrian directed Mr. Smith to Grace Hospital.

At the hospital it was discovered that Dr. Thomas, who still remained unconscious, had sustained several broken bones in addition to the severe wound on his head, and his condition was serious.

"Spare no expense," Mr. Smith instructed. "Give him the best room you have. Just as soon as he is able to talk I want to speak with him. If he's in any danger of dying I wish you to notify me before such a thing happens."

The surgeon assured him that he did not think there was any likelihood of such an event; and Mr. Smith, Maizie, and Patsy returned to the Stafford House, after the first had left instructions how he could be reached by telephone.

A large advance sale presaged a big audience at Hendrick's Opera House that night, and Patsy was anxious to sing in the handsome new theater.

All that afternoon Wilkins had rehearsed the Quigley Twins, who were all ready to go on.

The Bohee Brothers had the effrontery to put in an appearance as usual, but Muggs, who had been made familiar with the afternoon's occurrence, had ordered their exclusion from the stage.

They came around to the front of the house to interview Muggs, and Bill was in a highly virtuous state of indignation.

"What's the idee, Muggs, barrin' us out?" demanded Bill.

"Why, you dubs ain't got the gall to think ye kin still stay with the Megatharians, have ye?" cried the manager angrily. "Yer fired—both of ye!"

"Ye gotter give us two weeks' notice," said Bill insolently.

"If that's the custom, Mr. Muggs," said Mr. Smith, who stood close by, "give them two weeks' salary, and I'll be glad to pay it. I can sympathize with Gus, for he's been obliged to suffer for his brother's misdeeds, just as I have with mine."

With evident reluctance Muggs adopted this course, and after gathering together their belongings the Bohee Brothers took the first train for New York.

The curtain rose to a packed house, which proved a great stimulus to all the performers in the half-circle, and the first part went through with a snap that was electrifying.

The Quigley Twins scored heavily, and the time at last came for Patsy's number, "Girl o' Mine."

Maizie and Mr. Smith occupied one of the lower proscenium boxes, and he sang directly to them:

"Like the sunshine with the flow'rs,
  Girl o' mine,
How you fill with gold my hours,
  Girl o' mine;
How you brighten up my life
When the shadows most are rife,
As you share with me the strife,
  Girl o' mine!"

Thunders of applause rewarded Patsy's effort, and he was obliged to repeat the refrain again and again, while Mr. Smith felt a strong thrill of paternal pride as he bent over to whisper in Maizie's little pink ear:

"I don't wonder he won your heart with that silver-toned voice. But he's such a good-looking boy I don't like to see him in black face."

Just then an usher brushed aside the portières at the entrance of the box and said:

"Mister, yer wanted on the telephone."

Mr. Smith went out to the manager's office and the message came over the wire:

"This is Grace Hospital talking. Dr. Thomas is in a condition to see you, and you can come at once."

In a few more minutes the curtain descended on the first part, and, without waiting for the remainder of the performance, Patsy hastily washed up, at Mr. Smith's request, to accompany him to the hospital.

The ride there in an automobile was a short one, and they were taken to the room Dr. Thomas occupied. When the formality of the greeting was over and the surgeon and nurse had retired, Mr. Smith, turning to the doctor, said:

"Arthur, I have found my son!"

As he spoke he laid his hand affectionately on Patsy's shoulder.

"Yes," admitted Dr. Thomas, "the young man is undoubtedly your son."

"And you have known this all along," said Mr. Smith in a sorrowful tone. "For years you have let me go on, a lonely, heartbroken man, and kept the knowledge to yourself that I had a son."

"No," said Dr. Thomas. "I like yourself was ignorant of such a fact until chance threw us together when the minstrels came to Lakeville."

"But then you kept the secret to yourself," said Mr. Smith. "You even tried to murder my boy! How could you be so monstrous?"

"Gold has always been my curse, Herbert!" said Dr. Thomas. "For years the thought of possessing your great wealth has obsessed me. Apparently I was your only relative, your sole heir. You yourself have often told me that if anything happened to you I would inherit your millions. When I made the discovery that you had a son I saw my hopes of achieving your fortune vanishing. I determined, if possible, to keep you apart from your son. When I was balked in my design my rage got the better of me, and I tried to do away with him."

Mr. Smith gave him a look that was

more terrible than words, and with a strong effort controlled his feelings.

"You are in a serious state, Arthur," he said, "and it is not for me to add to your sufferings. But there are some things I must know. My son here has shocked me by telling me Mary died in the poorhouse."

"My first intimation of that," said Dr. Thomas, "was when he also told it to me."

"When I went to the Klondike," Mr. Smith continued in an agitated voice, "which was, as you know, for Mary's sake as well as mine, I gave you ample money to provide for my wife's needs. I left her in your care, Arthur. Answer me, as God is your judge, were you faithful to your trust?"

"There is no use of my lying to you now, Herbert," was Dr. Thomas's response. "I will tell you the shameful truth: I gambled all your money away. When I lost it I told Mary you had deserted her, that you had gone away for good, that she would never see you again. She left, but what became of her I never knew until two weeks ago. She found her way at last to the Squantum Poorhouse, where she gave birth to a child—and died!"

"You black-hearted scoundrel!" cried Mr. Smith in utter horror. "Then all that you told me when I came back was lies—lies! Mary was true to me. Always true to me. She did not leave me for another man!"

Dr. Thomas writhed under the other's terrible arraignment, and he moistened his dry, cracked lips with his tongue.

"The gap between us, Herbert," he said at last with some difficulty, "is too deep and wide for me to try to bridge it with words. You know me now for what I am."

"Thank God that I have learned the truth!" said Mr. Smith in a voice trembling with emotion. "You have wrecked my whole life, Arthur—you who had the same dear mother as I. But I can still thank God that Mary was always true to me—and that she left me the heritage of a son!"

"Go, I beg!" implored Dr. Thomas. "There is nothing more to tell you."

"Yes, I will go," said Mr. Smith. "We two must never meet again. You must not return to Lakeville, Arthur. You must go away—the further the better. You can communicate with my lawyers, and I will instruct them to provide you with a liberal allowance. But if I ever see your face again it will cease at once."

Patsy had taken no part in all this talk, but had watched Mr. Smith throughout with great pity, tenderness, and swift-awakening love. He gently placed his hand on his arm.

"Come, father," he said, "let's go!"

CHAPTER XXVII.

HALCYON DAYS.

BUMPER houses greeted Muggs's Megatharian Minstrels at both matinée and night performances on Saturday, and Patsy was the hit of the show.

Mr. Smith and Maizie occupied a box on each occasion, and they felt a reflected pride in the magnificent ovation that was tendered to the young singer of "Girl o' Mine." Strangely enough, none of his fellow-artists in the ebony semicircle exhibited any sign of professional jealousy because of his great triumphs.

Only once was Maizie's pleasure disturbed, and that was when she heard a very pretty girl in the parquette say in distinctly audible tones:

"I wonder if Mr. Evermond's married!"

Muggs was in the best of humor imaginable, for his share of the gross takings of the three performances was what might justifiably be termed important money. He had the comfortable feeling that in his present secure financial position he would not cringe and fawn—even in the dread presence of the head of the Theatrical Syndicate.

The troupe laid over in Grantville on Sunday, and all were most enthusiastic about the town, basing their favorable opinion on the facts that business had been most excellent and the hotel was good.

Mr. Smith had the best suite of rooms that the Stafford House afforded, and in one of these he had a private midday dinner served, with Maizie, Patsy, and Muggs as his guests.

"Mr. Muggs," he said at last when the

smoke from their fragrant perfectos curled lazily up into the air, "to-morrow I shall rob you, not only of your bright particular star but your daughter as well. I am going to take them back with me to Lakeview."

"With Harold outer the show there'll be a big dent in the Megatharians," said Muggs lugubriously.

"I'm stuck on the minstrel bus'ness, father," said Patsy in a tone of strong regret.

"My son," said Mr. Smith, "I'm not selfish enough to try to induce you to abandon a career. When one is blessed with a great gift, no matter what it is, he should be generous enough to share it with the world, making rich and poor alike his beneficiaries. You have a fine voice, but it is still untrained. I shall provide you with the best teachers and give you every opportunity to become famous."

"I want to see Patsy singing in grand opera at the Metropolitan Opera House in New York," said Maizie with enthusiasm, "so I can sit in the golden horseshoe in a low-cut gown."

"I guess yer right, Mr. Smith," said Muggs resignedly. "Patsy's too good fur the minstrel bus'ness."

"You're wrong, Mr. Muggs," spoke up Mr. Smith quickly. "Nothing's too good for the minstrel business. And that's precisely what I want to talk about."

Muggs blew the smoke from his cigar up in a thin, gray ring, and waited with great interest for the other to resume.

"Minstrelsy," continued Mr. Smith, "is an amusement of purely American origin. Its seed was first sown by a few humble entertainers, and it took root, flourished, and has given delight to millions. Like any good American institution, it should not be allowed to languish—never to die! On the contrary, it should be carefully fostered and encouraged by the masses, for it is a part of this nation's history."

"Good fur you!" cried Muggs. "Now yer shoutin'!"

"What could be better," went on Mr. Smith, "than to hear the sweet, simple songs of the long ago — those wonderful melodies of that poor, unfortunate genius, Stephen Foster, and the heart-thrilling 'Dixie' of good old Dan Emmett, God rest his soul? And what could be better, I say, than to have depicted for the younger generation all those ante-bellum scenes in which a faithful black race figured with such rare humor and pathos? Why, Mr. Muggs, I consider the American who furnishes the bone and sinew for this good, clean form of entertainment in the same light with those who subsidize grand opera and Shakespeare!"

"Mr. Smith," said Muggs, "ye put pep in me. I'm a-gonna do all I kin to keep things up to the mark."

"You want to do even better, Mr. Muggs," said Mr. Smith. "Frankly your show is weak in spots. You ought to strengthen it as much as possible."

"I ain't got the cush!" said Muggs dubiously.

"I will back you," said Mr. Smith promptly. "Don't let expense stop you—I will stand back of you. Gather together the biggest, most talented organization you can—one you can book in the best theaters of the principal cities. Let salaries be no object, as long as the performers asking them deliver the goods. Whatever loss there is I will cheerfully pay, though I am confident there will be none."

"Muggs's Greater Megatharians!" cried the manager with his eyes sparkling. "I'll have 'em on the road next season."

The two shook hands to ratify the agreement, and Mr. Smith turned to Patsy:

"My son," he said, "will you sing for me 'Girl o' Mine'?"

So, to Maizie's accompaniment on the upright, Patsy sang the song, and when he reached the refrain tears shone in his father's eyes from the well of tender memories in his heart:

"Girl o' mine, girl o' mine,
It would grieve me
If you'd leave me,
Girl o' mine.
When my heart calls out you hear me,
And you comfort and you cheer me;
Oh, I want you always near me,
Girl o' mine, girl o' mine!"

Early next morning there were hearty hand-shakes and good wishes at the railroad station as Muggs's Megatharian Minstrels went West, and Mr. Smith, Maizie, and Patsy went East.

The day after their arrival at Mr. Smith's magnificent estate, Lakeview, Patsy and his father went to Squantum, where the former met a number of acquaintances, who assured him that they always knew he possessed a remarkable voice, and they had been confident right along that he would achieve the greatest success.

The object that had brought them to Squantum was a visit to the poor-farm, where Mr. Smith made all the inmates happy with generous gifts of money that would insure them comforts for many days to come.

They went to the corner lot that was unfeelingly referred to as the paupers' burying-ground, but which was none the less " God's acre," and Mr. Smith arranged for the removal of his wife's remains to the cemetery in Lakeville.

There soon after a stately marble shaft rose from the emerald sward with the inscription at the base:

Sacred to the Memory of
MARY GRAHAM
Wife of
JOHN HERBERT SMITH
'Tis but a little sleep, and weary eyes
But close to ope again in Paradise!

Life at Lakeview flows evenly and happily on, and the mansion, with its great retinue of servants, is hospitably open at all times for the reception of guests, though Patsy, Maizie, and Mr. Smith are very often absent in New York, where the former's voice is being developed.

Muggs and Mrs. Muggs are frequent visitors, but the former's visits are so diplomatically arranged that they will not conflict with his divorced wife's.

Mrs. Muggs, known to burlesque fame as Flossie Flitter, an erstwhile feature of " The Giddy Gotham Girls " company, with one and three-sheet lithographs, makes periodical and protracted stays, and is treated with all the deference due to Maizie's mother.

Increasing avoirdupois has relentlessly driven her from the business, but she still retains her great interest in burlesque, and in the luxurious rooms assigned to her she pores over that particular department in the variety papers, anxiously scanning the list of advertised letters to see if there is one for her.

Muggs is coining money with his minstrels, and his plans for the coming season are of the most sensational nature. When the Greater Megatharians take the road they will make the whole theatrical profession, so to speak, sit up and take notice.

As for Patsy and Maizie, they are as happy as the days are long, and it would seem that all her dreams of hearing him sing in the Metropolitan Opera House will soon be realized.

When he does, it will probably be under some highfalutin foreign name such as Signor Brazilnutta or Signor Gettadamon, and fat dowagers and thin débutantes will raise their lorgnettes and gasp when he soars to the altitude of high E.

But, just the same, it will be Patsy McGuire, the poorhouse boy, who went out with Muggs's Megatharian Minstrels.

(The End.)

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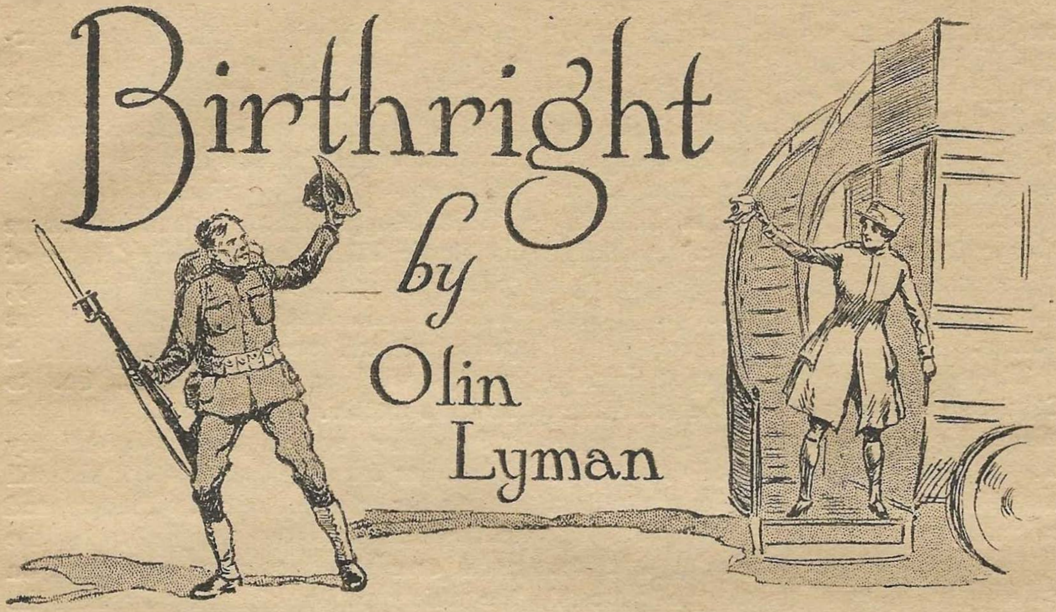


I.

"*APRÈS la guerre.*"

"And what does *that* mean, Renée?"

"It means 'after the war,' M. Sam. After the war, it might be that I should then think of marrying some horrible man. Like *you*, Sammee. But before? *Non! Non!*"

Was Sam Darnton, hustling representative of Dawson & Clegg, successful book-publishers of Manhattan, cast down over this hundredth refusal of the proffer of his hand and heart, made to the same girl?

He was not. Instead, from his five feet ten, he looked down at this even five feet of French animation, this dainty slip of a girl who chattered simultaneously with red lips, flashing dark eyes, and prettily waving hands, and laughed.

His tone half tender, half careless as usual when suggesting that Renée de Sallier should change her name, he pressed his point.

"But why not, Renée? Why not marry me and save me money? I am stuck on your language. It sounds like a fox-trot looks. I want to learn to speak it without paying for it. Say when, Renée, that's a good little girl!"

He had been wont to think that her laugh resembled a canary bird's, if the bird were of her size and could laugh at all. The note rang out now like silvery chimes. She replied in kind to his blithe mockery.

"*Après la guerre,* maybe. Till then, listen and learn what you can for your tongue to stumble over, so funnee! Say '*Après la guerre.*'"

Obligingly he started the phrase. In mock horror she gestured for silence.

"It hurts my ears! M. Sam Darnton, your—what you call?—job is calling you. '*Marchons!*'"

"Now isn't that just like a woman?" pensively asked Darnton of the metal ceiling. "Ask her to marry you for the millionth time—or for the millionth time to marry you—and you land in your neck in the alley!"

"What you mean by that, Sammee?" she inquired with a puzzled look. "Land on your neck in the allee?"

He chuckled wickedly.

"You tell me what a darned old war that's across the pond has to do with our getting married, and I'll tell you this neck business."

Suddenly sobered, she eyed him meekly from under lowered lids, her chin drooping, while he pursued his theme.

"I don't see what a lot of kings, engaged in a land-grab, have got to do with you and me. Ah, come on! Let me buy a ring—it would have to be the littlest one in the case—and we'll get a license, and I'll lassoo a flat somewhere, and later I'll write a book myself, and *sell* it myself, which is the harder proposition. I'll name it 'How to be Happy in Bronxland.' And we'll teach each other our language. I'll teach you slang, and you teach me French. And we'll be happy ever after.

"What do you care about the war? They're over there, and you're here. We'll be married and have a little war of our own. Let's!"

Her dark eyes darted toward the open door.

"Sammee!" she warned him, dimpling. "You behave! Here comes my brother."

Pierre de Sallier entered the little bookstall, situated somewhere in the environs of Greenwich village.

Dark, handsome, immaculate, he made a fine miniature figure of a man. He stood some three or four inches higher than his tiny sister. He was, however, far less spontaneous, and was always wrapped in the dignity of the serious-minded.

He felt to the full the responsibilities of his six and twenty years. There was also about him a pride of blood that he could make those Americans feel who could not show a row of initials jack-knifed into the trunks of their family trees.

With the open mind and heart of his Yankee heritage, Sam, when he first called at the little book-shop not quite a year before, had tried to "pal" with the little fellow as he grew later to do with his sister. But Pierre, while always courteous, had not "warmed up."

So, without resentment, Darnton had mentally acquiesced, even with quiet amusement. He had gathered that Pierre was one of those French counts who have had to work at something else pretty much since the days that followed the historic spilling of the beans by Marie Antoinette. It will be recalled that the good-hearted, if wooden-headed, queen, when told that the people could not get bread, asked why they did not eat cake as a substitute.

Pierre bowed gravely to Darnton as he entered. Sam, who had been waiting for him, took his modest orders for some of the latest publications, and, with a final bow to the dimpling Renée, picked up his case and departed.

"Some little trick!" he mused enthusiastically, apropos of Renée, as he walked on through the crisp autumn air toward the next stop. "I do love to kid her along; all the more, I suppose, because she's some kidder herself. And the swellest dancer in New York! We swept the boards at the armory hop last Friday. I must date her up for the one next week."

By which glance into his mental processes it will be seen that Sam and Renée's affair had not progressed beyond the first stages of "breeze." Such a state of affairs could never have been existent if Renée had been, for instance, a prim New England schoolma'am, or even serious-minded like Pierre.

But Renée was—herself, Renée; fascinating, coquettish, sparkling. Sam thoroughly liked her; she thoroughly liked Sam. They had quarreled with all the zest imaginable, and had an interruption occurred both would have missed the piquant sauce of their differences.

Sam's asking her to marry him had become a habit, pursued with pleasure. She had always some new way of turning him down; he was always wondering what the next would be like. Had she ever taken him seriously, and said "yes," he would have been at first astounded, then puzzled. As one would have been astonished after inviting some petulant butterfly to enter a cage, to find the gorgeous atom meekly and gravely crawling in.

No. Sam had no serious intention of marrying Renée any more than Renée seriously contemplated being married. Had Sam ever paused in his blithesome way gravely to ponder the question, the reflections would have fled before his amused laugh.

She was just a happy, animated little doll; lovely, care-free, skimming the shallows—as he was doing, for that matter. She wasn't much bigger than the traditional pint of cider. Renée as a "Mrs.," coquettish, volatile, childlike Renée? It was to laugh! Only Sam hadn't laughed yet. You see, he had not for a moment seriously considered the step.

In the mazes of a dance, occasionally at a movie, perhaps strolling on the beach at Coney, Sam liked to ask Renée if she would marry him. Always he smiled whimsically or laughed aloud at the refusals, never twice alike; the nimble Gallic wit that produced in a twinkling a new reason filched from the thousand and one why she should not.

It all belonged to the pleasant spirit of *camaraderie;* they were boy and girl together playing a game. Neither of them—Sam with his four and twenty years, and Renée with her nineteen—was grown up. They were boy and girl together playing a game of mutual liking, of ready wits, of minds alight but with unawakened hearts. Life was as yet the wading pool of a summer's day; the deeps of struggle and trial and doubt lay beyond.

II.

THE months at once winged and dragged on in the odd anachronism of a people's moods. The swift-flown days, bristling with head-lines, crises, and excitement effectually banished all sense of monotony that renders the paths of peace lethargic from the point of view of those souls that prefer a daily diet of tabasco. For such folk time unrolled like a fascinating film. But for others of vision, who perceived in portents a divine command that America arm and contend for the right, the months seemed a wearisome round of suspense while the inner voice cried out: " How long?"

To this latter body Sam Darnton did not belong. He was affiliated with that uncounted company of Americans destined to wake late to the truth only through the remorseless logic of accumulated events.

And at this time, months before the goddess of the west fastened on her buckler and took her shield and sword, Sam was one of those fine, upstanding, courageous young Americans who honestly saw no need for his land departing from its old policy of avoiding conflicts overseas. And the opposite idea he combated with all his power.

" Why should we help them to maul each other?" he would demand. " It's a dispute between a lot of paretic kings, jealous of the size of one another's armies! What are those poor ginks, those tools of theirs, fighting for? They don't know! I'm sorry for them, but I must refuse to be slaughtered for nothing! Besides, they're to blame themselves. Why don't they throw off the yoke, as we did in the Revolution? If they want to make cannon-fodder of themselves, are we to blame? Forget it!"

In which expression of views Sam Darnton was just as conscientious as were other young men, fully as manly and courageous and likable, who held views wholly different. To some souls vision is an inborn gift. To others it comes as the gift of a revelation. And in the melting-pot of common understanding all worth while are eventually patriots.

The question never came up between Sam and Renée de Sallier. Both were young, and both instinctively avoided what is known as " deep " discussions. There was plenty to mutually interest them without such questions. Besides, while Renée was probably patriotic, she did not parade whatever feeling she might have had for *la belle France.*

It is to be doubted if in those days she thought overmuch about the struggles of her native land. She had been two years with her brother in a new one; in mastering its language and its customs, in viewing its people, all her interest and her energies were concentrated. So not a serious word of dissension between Sam and Renée in their beliefs had risen. In fact, neither knew nor had ever thought of the sympathies of the other in this channel.

Nor had Sam ever talked on the subject with Pierre de Sallier. Early in their acquaintance the young Frenchman's austere manner had discouraged any degree of intimacy. Their relations had been strictly of business, though if Pierre had sought to discourage Renée's acceptance of Darnton's careless attentions, the effort had brought forth no fruit. Renée did in all things about as she pleased, and she tyrannized over the young count of book accounts as she did over M. Sam.

So the months dragged on, bringing nearer the climax which should fix the fate of many souls that had predetermined it, that should bring in the minds of many others a violent revulsion that would amount to shock.

Came a night when Sam was discussing the question with a pair of his friends in a picturesque Bohemian restaurant in the environs of Washington Square. The trio sat at a table in the main room, near the musicians' stand. Next them was a smaller room, and a Japanese screen stood half-way across the entrance.

The three had dined on spaghetti, *poulet*, and the other well-cooked abnormalities, and drunk just enough of the pink ink to become disputatious without boisterousness.

The possibility of war chanced to become the topic. Darnton's two friends, Bert Liddell and Tom Cowan, were ardently in favor of America entering the struggle. Like a consistent pacifist, Sam fought this view tooth and nail.

Enforced silence came presently when a fat tenor mounted the stage in the center, and with the young women's orchestra accompanying, effectually finished the "I Hear You Calling Me" that was started by John McCormack. When he had acceded to the demands of the undiscriminating, and repeated the execution of the last verse putting the chrome in the final chromatic, Liddell fixed Sam with an accusing stare.

"How about the sinking of the Lusitania?" he demanded.

"The Americans ought to have stayed at home!" asserted Darnton, repeating a sentiment that was common enough for a long time after that tragedy. "They were warned. If I'm told there's a free-for-all in one street I don't need to walk right into it, do I? Keep out of the rotten muss, I say!"

"In other words," put in Cowan, "lie down and roll over whenever the Kaiser snaps the whip."

"It's no question of that," retorted Sam. "It's minding our own business on our own side of the pond."

"You tell about this being a row between kings," pursued Liddell, lighting a fresh cigarette. "Well, France is a republic, the same as ours, and my hat's off to *her* in this war. What have you got to say about that?"

"France is as deep in the mud as the rest of them are in the mire," declared Sam vehemently. "The whole thing is a mutual quarrel over commerce, over the size of each patch in the sun. And France isn't the same kind of a republic as ours. She's been armed for years, hasn't she, looking for trouble? And she's getting it, the same as the rest. They're all in the same boat. A lot of bullies in a razor scrap, and France no better than the others!"

"*Monsieur, you lie!*"

The tone was quiet. The words were audible only to themselves. Neighboring diners could have seen in the incident only an acquaintance strolling to the table where the three young men sat, from around the screen that helped to divide the smaller room from the larger.

But the trio looked up startled into a face that was white with passion. There stood a diminutive figure, drawn up as if a ramrod lined his back. Black eyes glared into the amazed orbs of Sam Darnton.

Sam shifted slightly in his chair. Amaze gave place to anger in his eyes. His face grew cold with the curb that he applied to a naturally imperious temper.

"Explain yourself, Mr. de Sallier! I am talking privately with *friends*." His voice was dangerously low.

The other man's tone grew lower yet with repressed passion. De Sallier's patriotism was not of the noisy variety. His fingers closed convulsively upon the edge of the table. He bent forward. His eyes, snapping with challenge, searched Sam's whitening face.

"*Pardonne!* You talk in *public* against France. I shall not endure! For her I would die; it is my birthright. For the love of my land I speak; I, Pierre de Sallier. It is for our place in the sun we fight; *our*, the sun of *liberty, monsieur!*

"You, you have the memory that is short. You fought for liberty in your Revolution, as we fought for ours. And who held up your hands? France—and Lafayette! Who presented to your country the figure of bronze, the lady of the torch, here in your harbor? A Frenchman, Bartholdi!"

For an instant he was silent, struggling to repress his emotion, while the three stared at him transfixed, Darnton with lowering brows. Then the little Frenchman swept on. Though still quiet, his words tumbled in a torrent of resentment.

"When first I came here, from France, I too had the dream, the mirage of your country. The hand of the sun, thought I, the sun of liberty; the hand France loved, for which France had bled. With such thoughts I looked upon the lady of the torch when first we sailed into your harbor.

"*Dieu!* What have I found here? My eyes have been opened. Your friends here, *they* know! They know there are too many men like yourself, *monsieur*, who brutally will not understand anything that is not money. They know as I know that America has been stamped with the dollar-mark—"

"Oh, say, mister!" put in Liddell, his tone sharp while near-by diners looked around for the first time. "That's going too far—"

Sam Darnton raised his hand.

"Let him finish!" he commanded.

The Frenchman bowed toward Liddell. His eyes, unappeased, flashed again to Sam's face.

"I shall finish in a moment, *monsieur*. You are like how many millions in your land? If ever your own history you knew, you have forgotten it. You care not for the shedding of blood but for the piling of bullion. You will grow rich from making munitions for the Allies, yes; but with the same hands that take the checks you will wave away the thought of war even to avenge the insults that the enemy has heaped upon you. You and your kind are detestably selfish. And you presume to sneer at France!"

Calmly Sam lighted a cigar. He did not hear, nor any of them, a soft step approaching from behind the screen. Nor did any of them see a pair of dark eyes, opened wide, surveying the tensed group.

Darnton looked up at De Sallier, still bending over him menacingly. Sam's narrowed eyes were steely with a cold light. "You say you would die for France?" he queried.

"Yes!" passionately answered De Sallier.

Round about them the necks of diners were craning their way; the manager of the restaurant, standing by the music-stand, was beginning to look toward them.

Sam blew a ring of smoke.

"Then what are you doing here? You had better go back to France—and die!"

In the next breath the shattered cigar flew across the table. With dilating eyes and livid face Darnton flashed up from his chair.

A trickle of blood coursed from his cut lip down toward his chin. De Sallier had struck him full across the mouth.

Darnton's two companions had sprung to their feet. The diners were agape; there rose a great confusion; the manager came hurrying.

Sam's big right hand clenched. A sudden shriek withheld it as it was about to obey an elemental impulse and dash into the face of the smaller man, who confronted him indomitably despite the odds as the American towered above him.

Seeming to Sam as unreal as a dream, in the seething flare of his anger, the small, dark, terrified face of Renée de Sallier appeared before him. A little hand clutched at his arm.

"Sammee!" she cried, a sob in her voice. "Do not hurt my brother!"

Hearing her, his primal urge became deflected from the brute desire to maim, to smash, to something more cruel, something sinisterly subtle. His mind like a jet of lava leaped to a new determination. He would respect her wish for this insect who had publicly humiliated him. He would not hurt his fragile body. He would do worse. He would rend his leonine pride.

Vengefully his big hands shot out, gripping the slight form of the Frenchman on either side under the arms. He lifted him, kicking like a puppet at arms' length, as if he had been a doll. He half turned, dropping him, snarling, upon his feet by Renée's side. He found himself speaking hoarsely, mechanically.

"Take him home! Give him some paregoric. Good night!"

Turning, and followed by his two friends, he stalked for the check-room, wiping the blood from his chin with a clean handkerchief.

III.

WAKING the next morning, Sam's first conscious memory of the encounter, summoned by unpleasant sensations in his bruised lip, brought a mixture of irritated embarrassment and regret.

A decent, quiet young man, who regarded a public brawl with horror, he recalled with reluctance the details of his altercation with the fiery young Frenchman. And that Renée had been there to see and hear inspired him with the keenest of regret. His spirit recoiled as he pictured her inevitable chagrin and humiliation.

He was profoundly glad that her dismayed cry had diverted his first intention of striking De Sallier. Not only did he revolt in cooling moments from the idea of felling a man physically inferior to himself, but the fellow was Renée's brother. And as he had repaid Pierre's blow with humiliation far harder to bear, he made no doubt that Renée would never forgive him.

Why, he wondered, had he not guessed that the girl was there dining with her brother? Yet it was natural that he had never thought of her. Pierre's verbal onslaught upon him had been so unexpected, that he had thought only of Pierre until the moment, when about to knock him down, the appealing cry and face of Renée had stayed his hand.

Now the good times, the occasional dances or entertainments, the passing badinage, all were over. And Sam felt admittedly lonely.

Living over the unpleasant scene in retrospect, he indulged in regrets as inevitable as useless. Why had he and his two friends chanced to select that particular restaurant? They had never been there before. And why, after the trouble had begun, had he not managed to keep just a little cooler, recalling the possibility that Renée *might* be there, and treating the venom of the wasp with complete indifference that would have disarmed him?

Why have launched that final stinging gibe, which had apparently touched Pierre in a raw spot and precipitated the blow? True, Pierre had been irritating, but Sam could have remained master of the situation, and he had not done so. Consequently the comradeship between him and Renée was a closed incident.

Toward Pierre he entertained bitter resentment, inspired by this very fact. To what justice, from the Frenchman's view-point, might have lain in his arraignment, Sam gave never a thought at this stage. Merits of argument were obscured by the personal view-point. Pierre had "horned in," that was all, mixing in what was none of his business. And through this fact Sam had lost Renée's comradeship.

He went about his duties that day, depressed, moody, with a heavy heart. He caught himself constantly thinking of Renée. He found that he had prized their blithe, easy-going friendship more than he had realized. And now it was finished.

He welcomed an order from headquarters that afternoon which despatched him on a night train for a three weeks' trip westward.

He threw himself into work while he was away, telling himself that the break with the De Salliers was the way of the world. It was meant to be; let it go.

But he was strongly tempted, while sitting about hotel lobbies in the evenings, to write to Renée. This impulse he sternly denied; it would do no good.

He returned to Manhattan. The second day he succumbed to his desire to be again in touch with her. He walked slowly one afternoon toward the little book-shop. He told himself he would look inside.

If Renée were in there alone he would walk in as if nothing had happened. She could do no more than turn him down.

He felt his heart pounding as he approached the corner. It was an unaccustomed sensation in his care-free life. He wondered fretfully at it.

He arrived opposite the store and gave it a look askance. He stopped stock-still and stared.

It wore the unmistakable air of a place deserted.

And now in the window he noticed a sign, " To Let."

A small grocery was next door. The fat proprietor stood in front of it, smoking a long pipe.

" What has become of the De Salliers?" asked Sam. And even to himself his voice sounded dry and hard with suspense and apprehension.

" Oh," answered the grocer, " the young fellow was a French reservist, you know. They sent for him to join the ranks. He acted quick. Sold out his stock the next day, and the day after that he and his sister caught a steamer. He's a fire-eater, he is!"

Dizzily Sam Darnton turned away.

He knew at last—knew that he loved Renée—and she was gone.

IV.

SAM's mind was of that type that, while inclined to be dogmatic, was still willing to be shown—when he got ready to let it. In the days following the departure of the De Salliers he came secretly to acknowledge that he had been wrong about Pierre. His prompt departure upon call had amply justified the Frenchman.

Sam had forgotten the thousands of reservists among the warring nations, living in America with folk dependent upon their earnings, who leaped at whatever sacrifice whenever the call came from overseas.

What Pierre had done wholly proved his sincerity.

Sam now saw in a new light his lingering in New York. He remembered many silent evidences of the De Salliers' economy during those last months. Renée's plain little gowns; their infrequent and inexpensive recreations; the luncheons and breakfasts prepared by gas in the tiny living quarters in the rear of the shop, an arrangement they had made, as Renée had once lightly explained, because it was " more homey."

Sam understood now. They had been saving as much as possible against the day when Pierre would be called to the colors. And when the call had come, Renée, as a daughter of France, had gone with her brother.

That she had not told Sam of any such intention was not strange. What opportunity had he given her? What confidence had he invited? Throughout he had treated her not as a woman, but as an animated doll. And with the fine reserve of her race in matters lying close to the heart, she had not proffered confidences that his airy manner had not encouraged.

He told himself now, as the dull ache persisted. that he had not known Renée. And with the irony of fate, till she had gone from him, he had not known himself.

In the heaviness which now possessed his spirit, heaviness that had to be masked with the brave smile and alert manner which business hours demanded, Sam Darnton, formerly care-free and happy-go-lucky, was growing up. For dawning maturity is not so much years as it is strength of the spirit, its growing capacity for bearing burdens and responsibilities.

He recalled now, often in the lonely evenings. how sometimes in his talks with Renée, her dark eyes had been wistful and her face shadowed, her manner subdued. Might it not be that she was then thinking of the trials ahead; that a little of sympathetic divining on his part would have summoned the confidence she may have been wanting to give him?

But instead, desiring her more blithesome moods that he missed, he had rallied her with some droll remark, and with a patient smile she had accorded them.

If only he had wakened in time! But he had only memories. She was lost somewhere in the swarm overseas, fighting for France.

Fighting for France!

Somehow the phrase haunted him. The words that had seemed empty before were gradually invested with new meaning. One day he heard a street-piano grinding out " The Marseillaise." He stopped and listened.

He had often heard the air. Before it had meant little to him but a barbaric jumble of sounds; but now it was different.

Slowly its new meaning shaped in his mind. The song, not of an autocratic king, but of a people. A regnant, glorious, passionate song. The song of a people demanding the substance of a vision. Liberty!

For the rest of the afternoon the strains reverberated in his mind. Within him was an odd unrest, something he could not analyze yet. Something of which he had never been conscious was waking to life in the depths of his soul.

Remember that this was many weeks before America had declared a state of war. It was the period of continued doubt and uncertainty. Sam Darnton was not destined to be belatedly swept by the great wind of patriotism, billowing among the masses. It was characteristic of him that he should be his own pathfinder.

That night after dinner he stood on the curb, after two hours' aimless walking. His brain was awhirl with some mysterious message; chaotic, elusive, random, not yet to be interpreted. Not since the day he had learned that Renée had sailed had he known such unrest.

But it was not that, not though the loneliness had grown more unsupportable. It was something else; some dim impulse darting, an impulse that had flared to life not yet understandable since the moment he had heard, as if it had been an air newborn, the strains of "The Marseillaise."

Suddenly he became conscious of a voice next him, under the bright lights of Broadway. A thin, sneering, cynical voice, the voice of one who mocks the verities of life.

"They're talking war, the damn fools! They must want trouble. Are we men or are we cannon-fodder? They'd have a fine chance to get *me!* I've got only one life to live. Let 'em come after me, and buhlieve me, little Billy 'd turn up missing! Talk about this rotten country! The way they're talking, a guy'd have a better chance for his skin in Mexico with Carranza!"

To Sam, casually listening, the effect in his overwrought state was like dropping a spark on gunpowder. A sudden flame flared in his eyes. He turned quickly as the fellow ceased speaking.

He beheld a thin-faced, furtive-eyed chap of about his own age. A cigarette drooped from his loose lips. He wore a resounding suit of clothes.

The man next him was speaking. He weighed too much. He bulged with oily self-satisfaction as with flesh. His voice was fat, too.

"*Now* you're talking, Billy! What the hell do we want to mix in this war for? Ain't business flowing in? Let's get it, and let 'em cripple each other if they want to be fools enough. We'll get *all* the business after the war. What's the use of invitin' the hospital for ourselves? There's a lot of sickish sentiment spilled these days. This flag wavin' 'd give you a pain. It's plain rot!"

"*You're a liar!*"

They both started violently to stare amazed into a face white with passion. Sam's hands were clenched in his pockets. His eyes seared the fat face of the older man.

Then he turned his gaze to the mean visage of the younger, and essayed in a flash the empty space that a spirit should have tenanted. His low voice spoke again huskily.

"You're a coward!"

The two stared at him agape, wordless, each of them mentally noting his heroic proportions. Again Darnton measured them with a withering glance from head to foot while the craven gleamed dismayed from the eyes of both of them.

Sam succinctly finished the indictment.

"You're *both* cowards!"

With that he walked rapidly away. Somehow within the turmoil of his brain the big idea, the idea that had been haunting him, became intelligible, assumed definite shape.

He knew what he would do in the morning.

Striding off, to him came a memory like a thong. He knew at last the impulse that had brought Pierre de Sallier hurtling into the conversation, that night in the restaurant. It had been that of righteous and just anger.

Suddenly he felt wholesome shame as the sophistries with which he had honestly deluded himself dissolved under the fierce white light of revelation that inevitably at last beats upon the throne of the mind.

Wonderingly, with repugnance, he glanced back at the two figures on the corner, still standing looking after him. With a few words of leave-taking, uttered mentally, he buried the Sam that had been.

"My God! Is it possible that *I* was of that flabby crew?"

V.

CAME the new order of the enemy for unrestricted submarine warfare. The nation responded to the President's call to arms. Conscription was ordered. The youth of the country registered. The fateful capsules were drawn. The men in khaki entered the concentration camps and began their drilling.

But Sam Darnton had not waited to be called when many were chosen. He was one of the advance guard, a private in a regiment of regulars.

He had enlisted at a West Side army recruiting office the morning after a pair of sordid pacifists had opened his eyes to what he wanted.

In due course, winged over wires a secret order from Washington. With many others, Sam boarded a transport that, cordoned by cruisers and destroyers, sailed from an Atlantic harbor without attendant fanfare of publicity.

Coursing the gray Atlantic, while the sentinel craft kept sharp watch for the U-boats that are the grisly wolves of the sea, Sam's pulses thrilled as he thought of their destination. Somewhere in France was Renée, whom he had come to love deeply, as he had come to love his flag.

Somehow they had grown to be oddly as one to him, Renée and the flag. She had gone back to her own, overseas; it seemed as if since then her soul had been calling unto his to do its duty. And now he was following, under his own flag, to her land, the land he had loved because it was hers.

Sam's reasoning had not progressed yet to the point of there existing in this war an international community of interest. Renée had not consciously influenced his enlistment. It had come of the waking of his birthright of patriotism. With his first clear thought of what was due his flag had come his act.

But now, sailing to France, he was thrilled to think that his own flag would float there, with Renée's. When he had enlisted war was no more than a sinister possibility for America. Nothing had been decided. Sam had entered the ranks to justify the new-born faith in him, with not a thought that a few months would see him crossing the ocean. But now he was glad, because it was where *she* was.

He might never see her again, lost in the swarm as she was, but to tread the soil she loved would be a privilege. They landed safely at an unnamed French port. At the sight and sound of greeting cheering throngs, the sons and daughters of France, Sam's heart warmed with a fraternal throb. Never had he realized till this very moment just how much meant the term of "Allies."

Into camp and the first lessons looking to the hard grind ahead. On all sides came to Sam and his comrades evidences of the good-will of the French, of their faith in the lion heart and the strong arm of the great western land. And now with the days grew in Darnton a great pride. He flushed when he thought how little he would have deserved this trust a few short months before.

More and more he was sensing the epochal significance of this welding of arms against a common foe. But its complete scope and significance were yet to come to him.

Under the blue skies of storied France he made ready for his test of blood and iron. He was one of many good fellows, who were wont to chuckle and laugh in those early days when Darnton would start instinctively and turn at the cry of "Sammee!"

For such was the pseudonym immediately applied to the boys of Uncle Sam by the French, and at first Sam quite naturally assumed during startled instants that he was the entire army.

News came that a picked detachment of Pershing's troops was to parade in the streets of Paris on the Fourth of July. To

Sam's great delight, he found himself one of those selected.

The big day arrived. Along the Champs Élysée they marched, the vanguard of the men who would in the fulness of time repay a debt of nations. Heads up, shoulders squared, rifles on shoulders, they trod between vociferating banks of multi-thousands, Stars and Stripes waving. Roars of acclaim ascended, attesting the bond between the world's two greatest republics.

Under the Arc de Triomphe, the grand memorial to Napoleon, the autocrat, who was also through divine anachronism the father of French democracy, and by the Invalides where wounded soldiers cheered them, they strode and stood at attention. The ceremonies concluded, they marched on for the benefit of sightseers, pelted with flowers, showered with godspeeds, made the recipients of frantic adulation.

At last along the stalwart line in khaki ran a welcome command:

"Battalion, rest!"

Smiling, momentarily released from tension, the men leaned easily upon their rifles, fanning themselves with their hats, answering laughingly in their breezy American way to the shrill good wishes and salutations of the friendly aliens who crowded around them, shaking their hands, seeking even to embrace and kiss them. Smiling *gendarmes* made pretense of shoving back the crowd that billowed like sea-waves. It was a scene typically French, typically American, marking a historic day of uniting.

Sam Darnton stared about him with an air curiously detached. Some one touched his sleeve. He looked down and smiled absently into the eager face of a chubby child, at which its mother was clutching while she laughed and chattered volubly a message that he did not understand.

"*Sammee!*"

Innumerable times he had heard the cry that day. But what was there in this particular hail that brought him erect, that set his pulses tingling, that set his eyes to roving eagerly about that sea of faces?

"*Sammee! Oh, Sammee!*"

He saw her now, not a dozen feet from him toward the curb. He saw her dear head, surmounted with a funny little round cap with upturned brim; saw her mite of a snowy hand waving frantically. And she was head and shoulders above the surrounding crowd. How had she, who had been so little, grown so tall?

Straightway Sam Darnton plunged through the mass to see. And then, standing before her while he crushed her little hands in his own, he knew.

Upon her tiny feet on the pavé Renée could never have seen him. But here she was perched on the second step—or was it the third?—of the winding stairway leading to the top of one of those buses copied generously on Fifth Avenue in his own town.

"Renée!" he cried huskily. "Renée!"

Impetuously she descended a step—two—until she looked up into his face instead of down.

"Sam!" she cried, and he thrilled at the spontaneous gladness in her tone.

Then for the first time his gaze traveled down her slim little figure while his eyes widened with astonishment. Why, she looked somehow *official,* this twittering little canary of a Renée, and all in spotless white duck. A long, trigly fitting skirted coat, a glimpse of loose breeches below it, slender limbs incased in white puttees.

"Girly," he laughed, nor remembered that, for all their badinage in the past which now seemed so remote, he had never addressed her quite so intimately, "whatever are you doing in uniform? I know that all the women of France are doing *something,* of course; but what are *you* doing?"

Her arm swept in a comprehensive gesture toward the bus on the step of which she stood.

"*I,* Sammee?" she repeated, and there was a gentle dignity in her tone, and pride, too. "Behold, I am the conductaire!"

Then, as he bowed gravely and blinked away, withal, a blur summoned by the sight of this little girl become a woman, to do her bit for France, she burst out enthusiastically, dark eyes snapping and with tiny waving hands.

"I knew, when word came that the brave general would be coming, that you would be with him, Sammee. You see, I *dreamed* it. I knew you would become a soldier, brave and big, and sail here to fight for the truth!"

Something big and warm and compelling welled in Sam's heart. A desire to make amends for a cruel gibe, launched under whatever stress, long months before at one of her blood.

"Little girl," he asked her softly, "where is Pierre?"

And her voice came low and firm and clear.

"Pierre? He is at rest. He died for France, two months ago."

A moment he remained overwhelmed, gazing into her pale face, reading the splendor there. Frail, little, alone, she was going on, indomitable, doing her work for France.

For France?

No! For the world. And in that tremendous moment, standing, looking into her eyes, the throng forgotten by each, the full import of the work in hand, the world's work, smote Sam Darnton like a blow for righteousness. Its full glory shone before his eyes and dazzled them.

He pressed closer the little hands within his own. He voiced the message, a message of consecration for them both, till what might befall, to the gate of the Great Adventure and beyond.

"Renée! Pierre has not died for France; he lives forever, in memory, as one of the deliverers of the *world*. It's for *liberty* we fight, men and women, of all free races. I *know* in this moment. I know what swept *me* here, as if it had been by an east wind, to find *you*. And now we'll fight, you and I; you in Paris, I in the trenches, and be glad. Fight for our birthright of liberty, as Pierre did. We'll pray that I may return; that we may marry—and if not, to meet beyond. Shall we, Renée, little girl?"

"Yes." And her look was that of a soul dreaming under supernal stars.

Her eyes caught a portentous movement in the line of khaki.

"Wait!" She thrust a printed card into his hand. "Write! In care of this bus company. It will reach me. And we shall write often, yes?"

Came a commotion along the line of khaki, the relaying from mouth to mouth of a brusk order.

"Sammee!" cried the girl, and now there were tears in her eyes. "*Au revoir!* It is for you, *marchons!*"

"*Au revoir!* Love, always, Renée!"

He clasped her close and kissed her. He pushed back through the animated throng, and gained his place in the line. Rhythmically it got under way. Fate, unseen, moved with it, keeping step.

The column wheeled at an adjacent side street. One swift glimpse Sam caught of the place where he had stood. Above the heads of the throng waved a little white hand.

Fate walked at the side of the column, voicing its ghostly call:

"*Marchons!*"

A CRADLE-SONG OF TO-DAY

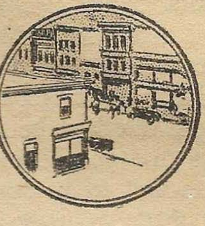
UNLESS the Belgian babes are mine,
I fail you, littlest one;
I'm but a woman who bore a child
And not the mother of a son!

Unless, as you lie close and warm,
I hear their hungry cry,
I but rejoice with Pharisees
That famine passed us by.

If I am blind to pleading hands
As I thank God for you,
My prayer shall never reach His heart,
Nor my "Amen" ring true!

Margaret Busbee Shipp.

Slow Burgess



by Charles Alden Seltzer

Author of "Riddle Gawne," "The Two-Gun Man," etc.

WHAT HAS ALREADY HAPPENED.

WHEN William Burgess, banker, of Paro City, died, Big Dave Dawley compelled Judge Quinn, who was in his power, to appoint him executor. Presently he produced a will, by the terms of which William Burgess left everything to Dawley in case his son, Clay Burgess, did not appear to claim the property. Dawley had a confederate, Dal Coleman, witness it; and when Ben Davis, the justice of the peace, refused to place his notarial seal on it, Dawley quietly told him to leave town. Being in Dawley's power, Davis left, whereupon Dawley put the notarial seal on the will himself.

Ben rode to a ranch and, in conversation with Della Bowen, expressed a passionate hope, which Della seconded, that William Burgess's son Clay, who had left ten years previously, would return to claim his inheritance.

Clay Burgess did return. Dawley, who meanwhile had ruined Jay Hammond by refusing to renew his note, asked Clay to prove his identity. Clay went to the court-house to do so, but the weakling, Judge Quinn, refused to be convinced. Dawley entered, as well as Dal Coleman and Sheriff Mogridge, all heavily armed, as was Burgess. By challenging Burgess to show an identification mark on his back, they got him at a disadvantage as he was pulling his shirt over his head, and set upon him. After a terrific fight, in which Coleman was shot by his own weapon and Mogridge was felled by a blow, Burgess held a pistol on Dawley. But he did not shoot. Dawley ordered his arrest on the ground that he had shot Coleman, and the judge called upon the townspeople, who had gathered at the doors and windows, to intercept Burgess. Burgess swept his pistol around in a circle.

"Everybody stand!" he ordered. "I down the first man that moves a finger!"

CHAPTER V.

AT THE WATER-HOLE.

STILL backing, Burgess reached the door and flung it open. For an instant he stood framed in the opening, sweeping the attentive crowd with cold, alert glances.

Nobody moved. Still backing away, still menacing them all with the pistol, Burgess reached Darkey. With a quick leap he was in the saddle, and before his feet could find the stirrups the black horse was thundering down the street, his flying hoofs sending the dust splaying in all directions.

"Go after him!" bawled Dawley from the doorway.

Derisive grins greeted Dawley's words. A man far back in the crowd guffawed loudly:

"It's your game, mister man. Play it yourself!"

For a distance of two or three miles the black horse held a rapid pace, covering the ground with long, swift, leaping strides.

This story began in The Argosy for March 30.

Then, scanning the back trail and seeing no signs of pursuit, Burgess drew the black down and gave some attention to the wound in his shoulder.

The bullet had gone clear through him, rather high, paralyzing the big muscles of the arm and shoulder. He could feel the shirt sticking to his back, and knew that the wound must have bled much there, while in front he was drenched—a patch on the gray shirt grew larger as he watched it.

There was nothing he could do except to attempt to stop the bleeding. Taking his handkerchief from a pocket, where he had put it in the court-house, he stuffed it between the shirt and the wound. Then, speaking to Darkey, he sent him forward, following a narrow trail that led eastward.

He faintly remembered the trail as one he had ridden years before. It led to a section of broken country just beyond the big level where he was riding. He seemed to have recollections of a water-hole near the edge of the broken country. If it were still there, he could stop and attend to the wound, and then he could ride northeastward to Fillets, over the county line, where he could stay until the wound healed. Later he would return to Paro to square his account with Judge Quinn, Dawley, and Mogridge.

He had no delusions regarding his chance of securing fair treatment at Paro. He had no plans for the future beyond a determination to even the score with Dawley. Uppermost in his mind was a realization of the necessity of getting somewhere quickly, that his wound might receive the attention it needed.

Yet he soon discovered that he could not ride fast, for the exertion caused the wound to bleed more freely. He drew Darkey down and rode carefully. But even at the slow gait the bleeding did not cease.

He was beginning to feel a gradual waning of strength. Unmistakably his right hand trembled, and he felt himself swaying slightly from side to side. At first the movement was barely noticeable, but as he continued to ride forward and the swaying grew more pronounced, he halted Darkey and with a grin of grim derision took note of the movement.

There was no doubt of it, he was undeniably not the steady rider he had been. He had been hurt more badly than he had thought. Objects were swimming in his vision. He fixed his gaze on a clump of filmy mesquite dead ahead on the trail, and was surprised to see it dipping grotesquely.

Darkey's head, too, was swaying strangely, and seemed to be a great distance from him. The derision on his face faded and was succeeded by a frown. A bitter, vicious rage seized him, and for an instant he meditated returning to Paro to send Dawley and Mogridge ahead of him to that death which he was now certain he was going to meet.

He swung Darkey around, heading him toward Paro. Then a thought of his condition dissuaded him. For in that direction lay more fighting, and he was in no shape to meet it. If he kept on toward Fillets there was a chance for him.

Abruptly wheeling Darkey, he sent him forward again. For an hour he rode steadily, the reins hanging from the pommel of the saddle, his right hand pressed against the neckerchief over the wound.

The swaying of his body had grown more noticeable. There were times when he lurched forward, almost over the saddle-horn. Becoming aware of that, he took his hand from the neckerchief and gripped the pommel. But the expedient availed little, for there was not much strength in the arm, and the slightest pressure of his body against it broke the clutch of the numbing fingers.

He stuck doggedly to it, however, knowing that he dared not yield to the weariness that was stealing over him, though now the world had become a vast, luminous blur into which he seemed to be riding aimlessly.

Indeed there were several times during the next hour when he did not know whether he was riding at all, or whether he was even moving. And when, after a great while, during which he fought hard to center his mental faculties on the present, to summon his thoughts from the thousand vagaries upon which they insisted in dwelling, he became vaguely aware that Darkey had halted. With an effort he steadied himself and gazed around him, fixing objects in his vision with a sort of wearied concentration.

Almost at Darkey's feet he saw the water he had set out to seek. He feebly patted Darkey's mane, and slipped out of the saddle, falling into the sun-dried mud that surrounded the water, and reaching blindly outward, trying to touch it with his hands.

CHAPTER VI.

A CABIN AND A GIRL.

BURGESS had no means of knowing how long he had been unconscious, nor was he convinced—after a long period of serious consideration—that he *now* was conscious. For the scene upon which he opened his eyes seemed to be as unreal as the other fantasies with which his brain had struggled through an interminable time. So, after taking one look at his surroundings, he closed his eyes.

He had seen a log-ribbed ceiling, a roof, evidently, the logs supporting the familiar slabs of sapling thatched over with branches of trees and adobe mud dried hard as stone. Next, his perplexed eyes had observed a window close to his side, with a white muslin curtain fluttering in a slight breeze.

Then his gaze roved to the walls, where he saw shelves upon which were pictures and other ornaments. The pictures were small, and the other decorations not pretentious or valuable, but the presence of wall decorations, added to the undoubted fact of a muslin curtain at a window, suggested the presence of a woman—and Burgess was convinced that he was not dreaming. Then he turned his head slightly and saw her. At which he closed his eyes and smiled in faint self-derision.

After a time he again opened his eyes. She was sitting near an open door, busy with a needle, and her gaze was upon the open country that she was facing. Her profile was toward Burgess, and something in her appearance made Burgess slyly feel of the bedclothes with his good hand. He did not want *this* picture to turn out to be a dream; and when his fingers closed on the quilt that covered him and it gave back a feeling that convinced him of its materiality, his pulses leaped and he lay very quiet again, closing his eyes.

When he again opened his eyes, she was still sitting in the same position, and without making a motion that would attract her attention he watched her.

She wore a dress of some brown, smooth material, which fitted her snugly, revealing the graceful contour of her shoulders and arms. It was low at the neck, showing a slight sweep of shoulder, giving Burgess a glimpse of the slightly tanned skin where it joined the column of her neck.

Burgess looked at her as a lover of art examines a rare treasure, with a thrill of unselfish admiration. Her hair was brown, almost black, with a sheen that the desert light coming through the door, accentuated. Burgess remembered now what had happened to him, and feeling that somehow the girl had had something to do with his deliverance, he watched her worshipfully.

When she looked toward him, after a while, he stealthily closed his eyes and pretended to be asleep. And when she rose and came toward him, standing at his side and looking down at him, he felt like a criminal who had been ungrateful to a benefactor. But when she left him and walked toward the chair in which she had been sitting, he opened his eyes again.

She was rather taller than she had seemed to be while sitting in the chair—she was fully up to his shoulder, he assured himself. When she resumed the chair she tucked back some strange wisps of hair with the motion that women have used for ages. It was not the first time Burgess had seen women tuck wisps of hair away, but this time the action brought a nameless longing into his breast—a pang of desire that made his cheeks burn and tingle.

He must have gone to sleep again, for when he again saw the girl she was moving about in the room, from a stove to a table, and the aroma of cooking things assailed Burgess.

She had donned an apron, and the sight of it gave Burgess's pulses another leap—it aroused thoughts of a home long since forgotten. He was watching her, wide-eyed and interested, when she, standing at the table with her back to him, suddenly turned.

She started, then smiled.

"Awake?" she said.

He knew her voice would be like that—low, but rippling with buoyant spirits.

"I don't know. I've been trying to figure it out. I've been doing considerable dreaming, I reckon. But I don't seem to be able to work *you* in anywhere. Don't tell me that presently you'll go flitting away like—like a lot of other people that I've been talking to lately."

"I never 'flit,'" she said. "You mustn't talk—much. You have been terribly hurt, and we"—he winced at the "we," for it suggested a husband, and he had been hoping—"have had quite a time in getting you over it. If there is anything you want to know, I shall be glad to do what I can. But you positively must not talk!"

"All right," he grinned. "I'll listen. I remember being shot—in Paro. Then I started my horse—where is he, please?" he broke off, anxiously.

"In the corral. Ben has been taking good care of him."

"Damn Ben!" he remarked mentally. So it was a husband! "I started my horse toward a water-hole, which I thought I knew. That's all I remember. What happened then?"

"You reached the water-hole. It was late in the afternoon of the day before yesterday. Ben had gone away. I ran out of water and had to go for it myself.

"I saw you lying there. Your face was in the water near the edge. I—I am afraid I was scared. But I took care of your wound, gave you some water and got you here—before Ben came."

"How?"

"I can hardly tell you. Your horse helped. He is a wonderful animal. I got him to lie down, and I got you across him. Then he got up and carried you—oh, so carefully! Then Ben came, and we worked almost all night over you."

"Who is Ben?" He hated the name; he was sure he would hate its owner when he saw him.

Did she detect the venom in his voice? There was a slightly mocking note in hers when she answered:

"Ben is—Ben Davis. He used to be justice of the peace in Paro—until Dave Dawley forced *him to leave. He was my* father's friend."

Burgess gritted his teeth in his delight. For he knew Davis.

The girl continued: "Ben Davis was therefore compelled to settle here."

"Where is 'here'?" he asked.

"'Here' is a little cabin about half a mile from the water-hole you thought you remembered. It is about eighteen miles from Paro, and five miles from Williams's cache. We call Williams's cache Dawley's camp."

"Why?"

"Dawley is ruthless. He has broken a number of men. He rules Paro. He is the law and the law's prophet. If a man gets in his way he outlaws him. He is implacable. Most of the men he has broken are in Williams's cache. It is a stretch of unsurveyed and unclaimed land not yet legally attached to any State or Territory. Not even a Governor's power reaches there. Extradition is unheard of. At least Mogridge's kind do not attempt to go there.

"Not all of Dawley's camp is composed of men sent there by Dawley. It is a rendezvous for criminals of all descriptions. 'Flash' Denby is the ruler of the cache. I never heard his real name. They call him Flash because he is the quickest gunman in the country."

She must have divined from the expression of his face that he was wondering why she lived so close to a place of such ill-repute, for she raised her chin and looked at him with flashing, resolute eyes.

"They do not molest me," she said with conscious pride. "Twice they tried to, but they were eager to get away.

"You see," she smiled, "I was born and raised in Wyoming, where I learned to do a number of things that young women who live in more settled communities never hear of. When my father lost his ranch in Wyoming because he shot a man for stealing his cattle, we lost everything. I was in school at the time—in California—and daddy came here without me. My mother died before that. I came here with daddy—after a while. My father was Elam Bowen, and I am Della Bowen."

Burgess had heard of the incident prominent in the annals of cattle-raising in Wyoming, referred to as the "Bowen war," and he looked with a new interest at the daughter of the man who had fought a manly, courageous fight against mighty odds—to lose when the machinery of a law manipulated in the interests of unscrupulous men had centered its power against him. He drew a breath of admiration and sympathy.

"Your father found nothing here, I reckon?"

"Copper!" she breathed, her eyes gleaming with enthusiasm. "Tons and tons and tons of it! Free ore in chunks as big as your hand. Rotted and crumbling on the surface, waiting for some one to take it—waiting there for ages, six inches under the ground! I'll show it to you some day."

"And no railroad nearer than Taos," reminded Burgess gently.

"No," she said, her enthusiasm waning. "Much as there is of it, it wouldn't pay to haul it that far."

"Eighty miles, eh? And it's a rough trail."

Clay briefly told of his quarrel with Dawley, and how the latter had secured possession of the Burgess estate.

The girl flushed. "Our property, too, is in Dawley's clutches."

His eyes gleamed.

"How did he happen to get hold of it?"

"Father was penniless when he came here. Your father grub-staked him. But Dawley has taken charge. Oh, why didn't you kill him!" she breathed savagely.

"I reckon I don't know. I think it was because shooting wouldn't satisfy me. I don't see how my father grub-staking your dad lets Dawley in on the property."

She told him the things Ben Davis had acquainted her with, regarding Dawley's management of the estate. When she concluded Burgess laughed lowly.

"It's pretty plain, I reckon. Dawley wants to get control of all the copper. But with no railroad nearer than Taos—"

"There has been talk of the railroad coming through Paro." She saw him scowl. "They have almost reached Dry Bottom, coming this way. No one—except Dawley, perhaps—knows where the road is going after leaving Dry Bottom."

"Dawley knows," he said. "It's a big steal. Most likely the Governor is interested in it."

He lay quiet for a time, looking out of the window, she watching him narrowly, anxiously.

"And," she said after a time, "you can't do anything. I can do nothing. As yet Dawley hasn't bothered me. He hasn't even been over here. But when he turns his attention to us—to Davis and me—we shall have to get out. For I haven't the money to clear the place. And you," she added, with a strange, wistful look at him, "you have outlawed yourself. Dal Coleman is dead. Mogridge, Dawley, and Judge Quinn declare you killed him. You dare not return to Paro—they would hang you."

He laughed lowly, turning his head to look at her, a slow, ironic grin on his face.

"It can't be Elam Bowen's daughter that I hear saying she can't do anything," he said. "It must be that I'm still dreaming. I knew all along I was dreaming, but I kept hoping and hoping.

"Well, so long, ma'am. I've sure enjoyed your company, but I'll go to sleep again, and maybe I'll wake up and find that it's all a mistake. Maybe I'll find that Elam Bowen's daughter has changed her mind—if you're sure her—and that she's going to fight Dawley and Mogridge and Judge Quinn and the Governor, and any one else that tries to take her belongings from her.

"And maybe she'll find some consolation in knowing she's going to have company in that kind of a fight. You might tell her that a guy named Clay Burgess is going to do a lot of scrapping himself one of these days — when he's had enough sleep and mountains of grub to eat — and when Elam's daughter says she's with him."

"I am!" she whispered, coming close to him. "Oh, I am so glad! I was afraid—" she paused, and blushed.

"Afraid of what?"

"Afraid that you wouldn't—wouldn't be—what Ben Davis said he wanted you to be—what he hoped you'd be—what you are—a fighter!"

"Fighter!" he laughed, joyously "Why, I'm whipped right now!" And he turned his face from her—she noted a flush on it—leaving her to speculate upon his meaning.

CHAPTER VII.

PRODDING A SLOW MAN.

FOR seven weeks, while Burgess's wound knitted and the glow of health came back into his face, there was a lull in the intense action that had followed Burgess's arrival at Paro City. No word came from the town, except through the medium of Ben Davis's friend, Harvey Dobble, owner of the general store and a pioneer who had come to Paro before Dawley's time, and who did not like the man.

Paro was quiet, Dobble said. Apparently Dawley and Mogridge were satisfied that Burgess had left the town never to return, for they seemed to have lost all interest in him. That, at least, was the surface indication. What they might be planning secretly no one knew, of course. But if they were planning, Burgess had better keep his eyes "peeled." That was Dobble's advice.

But Burgess seemed undisturbed. When one day, not long after Dobble's visit to the cabin, Ben Davis told Burgess that, while he couldn't very well hurry the healing of his wound "none," he might talk a "trifle" about what he intended to do when he did get "real well," Burgess grinned mildly at him.

"They was a heap more ginger in your dad than they is in you, I reckon," Davis informed Burgess, frowning irascibly at the other, who was propped against a saddle under a juniper-tree in front of the cabin, a blanket spread under him.

"Meaning?"

"Meanin' that while you're settin' you might be doin' a heap of thinkin' on some plan that would pulverize that damned Dawley!"

Burgess grinned.

"I've been doing a lot of thinking, Ben."

Davis's keen old eyes glinted with savage scorn.

"Uhuh!" he sniffed. "Concernin' petticoats mostly, I reckon. Wimmin is all right in their places, I allow—an' they're a heap delightin' to the eye. But when a thing is gettin' seriouser an' seriouser with a man, an' they's a sneak like that damned Dawley a plottin' an' plannin' ag'in you all the time, a man hadn't ought to waste his time sighin' an' makin' moon-eyes at no female woman!"

"Speaking of Della Bowen, I reckon," said Burgess. "Why, Ben, I don't reckon I'm wasting my time with her. Besides, it isn't polite to discuss a lady."

"Get to yappin' about somethin' else, then!" urged Davis. "What you intendin' to do?"

"About Dawley? What would you suggest?" There was a gleam of amusement in Burgess's eyes. He and Davis had pursued this subject before, without reaching a conclusion.

"You're always comin' back to me with that there damned wise question!" snapped Davis. He glared at the other in futile rage. "I ain't no damned plotter like Dawley, or mebbe I could frame up somethin'. There's your dad's will, that I've showed you. There's Dawley, skinnin' you out of your property every day you set here doin' nothin'. What are you goin' to do about it?"

"Nothing, now." Burgess looked gravely at the grim face of the other. "What's the use of getting excited about it? Dawley will steal everything he can get his hands on, I reckon. But he can't steal Dave Dawley. And as long as Dawley stays in the country I'm not afraid of him getting away from me."

"Dobble sneaked a look at the record book in the court-house the other day," said Davis. "He saw an item in there, reading that your dad had willed all his property to Dawley in case you didn't show up an' qualify for it. That there clause makes it mighty profitable for Dawley to plug you promiscuous—him grabbin' off everything after you've cashed in."

"That ought to spur Dawley to action," smiled Burgess.

"An' you, too, durn you? If I was you I'd slip into Paro an' salivate the whole damned crew? Dawley, Mogridge an' that cringin' crook of a judge!"

"But being Ben Davis, you can only give bad advice to a lazy and worthless fellow named Clay Burgess."

"Well," said Davis, disgusted surrender in his eyes and voice; "I reckon you'll have your way about it—whatever that way is. The guy that tacked the handle 'Slow' on you sure must have seen you when your brain-box was crammed full of worthless thoughts—or a woman.

"You'll get a goin' some time, I reckon. But if I was your dad I'd wallop you til' the fur would fly! Bein' only Ben Davis, your dad's old side-kicker, I can only set back proud an' scornful, cogitatin' on why men don't make a better job of it in raisin' their sons. I reckon that little fracas you had in the court-house with Dawley an' Coleman an' Mogridge was a whizzer. It wouldn't have come off if Dawley hadn't forced your hand. You ain't got gumption enough to start nothin' yourself!"

Burgess chuckled as he watched Davis stamp away toward the stable, muttering wrathfully. Burgess was still smiling over the old man's impatience when a little later he stepped inside the cabin door and drank from a dipper that hung on the wall over a pail of water.

"Ben has been telling you things—again," said Miss Bowen. She was standing near the table, upon which she had just spread a fresh cover, and her eyes were dancing with enjoyment.

"Yep," returned Burgess. "He sure handed it to me!"

"Do you know," she declared gravely, though a smile was writhing at the corners of her mouth, "that I really think you deserve all he said to you. Of course, you have not been able to do anything—anything physical, that is. But don't you think you might have been trying to form some plan to checkmate Dawley and the others?"

"So you heard that?" he questioned. There was a quizzical squint to his eyes; the wrinkles in their corners were deep, and significant of mirth suppressed.

"I couldn't very well help hearing; I was standing in the doorway, and the two of you were not more than a mile or two away—at the most," she mocked.

"I reckon you didn't hear *everything* he said—did you?"

"Well"—hesitatingly—"almost everything."

"I reckon you heard him maligning your sex?"

Her face was red, but she met his gaze fairly.

"No, I don't believe I heard him do that. But I did hear him say something rather spiteful about men who waste time mooning at women."

"Well," he answered, hanging the dipper up and facing her. "I've done one of the things he said. You know which one. I leave it to you. Which was it?"

She smiled wisely, divining the trap he had set for her.

"Why," she said quietly, mischief in her smile, "you have wasted your time, of course."

He was badly crippled, and the glow on his face equaled the flush on hers.

"I invited that," he admitted courageously, smiling. "But there is much in how a man views things. And there's much in what a man's after. If I was after marriage, now, I reckon I'd have wasted my time—for you wouldn't have me. But if I knew all along that I couldn't get you, and I was just figuring to enjoy your company, I reckon I haven't wasted any time. For I've been a heap tickled to have you near me."

She was blushing now, furiously. But there was no escape and she stood bravely, meeting his gaze.

"Viewpoints—yes," she said deliberately. "But I am not to blame for being near you. I couldn't evade my duty."

Again victory perched upon her standard.

"I'm whipped—again," he said dolorously. "But I was hoping pretty hard."

And now that she had routed him, she pursued him without mercy.

"Whipped," she said. "That sounds familiar. So that was what you meant when you said that, the—the other time? I had been wondering."

"I've been wondering, too," he grinned.

"What?"

"Wondering why I was whipped. It never happened to me before. No woman has ever whipped me. You must have seen how it was with me. I reckon your wonder ended pretty sudden—for women can see those things quicker than a man can see them. You and Ben have had a lot to say about me not thinking the thoughts I ought to have thought about.

"But you and Ben—and you especially—haven't said anything to me about the things that I couldn't help thinking about."

There was a smile on his face, gentle and winning, but there was a graveness behind it that told her more accurately than any smile could have told her of the real state of his feelings toward her.

"Seven weeks of a woman hovering over a man and attending to his wants and whims, fixing his pillow and soothing him when he needs a heap of soothing—and walking back and forth looking like an angel that has come a ministering, has whipped many a man before me," he said. "And I ain't no exception."

He made no move toward her, but stood near the door, watching her, noting how the blushes came and went in her face.

"I've got the reputation of being slow," he went on; "and maybe I am. But you've sure got me some flustered since I've been here, and I feel like rushing things. In everything but in getting away from here, that is," he smiled. "And maybe if you was to say that there's a chance that I'm not wasting that time you've been talking about, I'd tell you that my brain hasn't been working as slow as you've been thinking it has."

A pulse of joy shot over her. Her lashes drooped to veil some emotion that leaped into her eyes.

"That is to be seen," she said lowly. "You can't expect me to say that—now! That would be bribery! It would look as though I had admitted it merely to send you away to fight Dawley through a selfish impulse. And that wouldn't be the reason—if I were to say it."

"You might do some hinting about it," he suggested, grinning.

"Well, then," she said slowly, lifting her eyes to his and then dropping them quickly with embarrassment: "there is a *very* slight chance that you have *not* been wasting your time."

She saw him become rigid; saw his eyes blaze and his hands clench slowly.

"Thank you, ma'am," he said gravely and earnestly. Then he laughed joyously, backing out of the door and looking at her where she stood, one hand resting on the table, her face rosy, her eyes luminous.

"If I was to tell Ben, now, that I am hoping—" he began. But she frowned at him.

"Don't you dare!" she commanded.

"Then I won't," he grinned. "Well, so-long, ma'am," he added. "I reckon I can be going now."

She stepped swiftly to the doorway and stood in it, looking at him, startled over the abruptness of his leave-taking, a shade of anxiety in her eyes.

"Where are you going?" she asked.

"To Williams's cache, ma'am." He grinned hugely. "I'm going to be a simon-pure outlaw now, ma'am. And maybe I'm wasting my time, after all."

"Oh!" she said. "You mustn't go there!"

"Do you want Ben Davis to be saying that I haven't got gumption enough to start anything? Do you think I want him to go telling you that? He told me this morning!"

"Well, then—if you are determined to go—I suppose you will. But—" She paused, and he saw a light in her eyes that made him draw a slow, deep breath. In the next instant he was at her side, drawing her close to him.

"I've been dreaming of that for a hundred years—it seems," he grinned as he again stepped down from the door. "And fulfilment is a heap better than anticipation. If I'd take another now—"

"One is enough," she laughed, placing a hand over her lips.

"Stingy," he said joyously, as he left her.

He waved a hand to her from the corral,

where he saddled the black horse and swung into the saddle. Again from the big level near the house as he rode northeastward, he waved to her, and she stood on the threshold of the door answering his signals until he and the black horse, traveling in a dust cloud, vanished in a distant depression.

She was still standing on the threshold half an hour later when Ben Davis, back from a ride in the hills, came upon her.

"Burgess has gone," she told him, her face a trifle pale, her lips stiff.

"Gone!" exclaimed Davis. "Gone where?"

"To Williams's cache," she told him. "He said that, henceforth, he intended to be an outlaw—a Dawley outlaw."

"The durn fool!" grumbled Davis. "I knowed damn well he'd go an' start somethin'!"

CHAPTER VIII.

WILLIAMS'S CACHE.

WHEN leaving Paro City some weeks before, Burgess had given no thought to the future. He had been able to think of no plan for revenge upon the smooth-talking, deep-thinking enemy who had, during the first day of his stay in Paro, enmeshed him in a carefully laid plot. His thoughts, when he had left Paro behind him, were in a turmoil of impotent rage. Only one thing was definite—that one day he would square things with Dawley. Yet he had known that the possibility was remote, for he could not return to Paro openly.

But during the days of his convalescence, through the long, lingering and peaceful hours when he had lain on his back looking out of the window; and during other hours—afterward—when he had been able to make his way outdoors; he had meditated much upon the situation, and had finally evolved a plan of action that—if it did not miscarry—would make the future very interesting for Dawley.

Every man's actions are governed by his estimate of himself. Burgess did not make the mistake of valuing himself too highly. There was a vein of grim humor in the mental make-up that governed him. That humor, tugging at Burgess on the day he had faced Dawley, after he had disposed of Coleman and Mogridge, had saved Dawley's life.

He had not killed Dawley then, because there had been something in the idea of the big man's bold and clever scheme that had made an insidious appeal to him. He hated Dawley, but back of the hatred was a measure of admiration, perhaps of curiosity over the man's probable future movements, that had caused him to spare his life at a moment when he had almost decided to kill him.

It was that grim humor which was sending Burgess to Williams's cache—that, and the conviction that it was his only chance to best Dawley without killing him.

And yet Burgess's thoughts, as he rode northeastward toward the outlaw rendezvous, were not of the danger that he was going to meet. He kept thinking of Della Bowen, and of the weeks—seeming to be years—that she had ministered to him.

He had seemed to know her always. Days upon end, watching her as she had moved about in the room, near him, waiting upon him, talking with him, it had seemed that the intimacy that their nearness to each other had aroused had existed for many years.

No other woman had made him feel as she had made him feel, and he had seen early in their acquaintance, the tell-tale glow in her eyes that had told him things that women's eyes have been telling to their love-mates for ages.

He was light of heart as he rode, for the events of the morning had convinced him that he had not mistaken the significance of the things he had seen in her eyes during the weeks he had known her.

"Maybe I rushed her a little this morning," he told himself as he patted Darkey's neck. "But it didn't seem like it was rushing to me, and I reckon she was mighty well prepared for it, too."

It took him an hour to ride the five miles, for he let Darkey walk nearly all of the distance.

Williams's cache, he saw when he came

within half a mile of it, was on a level near a river—the Carrizo—for he knew it. It doubled back sharply at a little distance west of the cache, swinging wide and running south into the Canadian. He had followed its banks southward many times.

Snug in the thrust of land near the river was a timber grove. In a wide clearing in the timber, rose the roofs of a number of shanties. There were a score or more of them, facing one another over a vacant space which answered as a street, but which was merely a sand level, hard, dry and dusty.

When Burgess drew closer, however, he saw that the vacant space was in reality a three-sided court. Two rows of shanties paralleled each other on opposite sides of the vacant space, and another row of buildings, crossing the space at its far end, near the river, connected the shanties on the sides, making a gigantic U into the mouth of which Burgess rode.

Hitching rails fringed some of the buildings, with several horses standing near them, and as Burgess swung out of the saddle in front of a building near the center of the row on his right, he saw several men—and two or three women—watching him from doors and windows.

The interest in the eyes of the watchers, Burgess noted as he threw swift furtive glances around him while tying Darkey, was not the casual curiosity with which the average cow-town greets every new arrival, but a speculative and intent wonder not unmixed with frank hostility.

But Burgess was unperturbed—he had expected hostility in Williams's cache—and suspicion. After tying Darkey, he straightened and glanced about him. For the first time, he seemed to note the watchers, and he grinned mildly at several men who were standing just inside the door of a building in front of which he had tied his horse. Burgess's glance, after sweeping the men in the doorway, went to a sign just above the door—a crudely wrought affair which bore the legend: " Joe's Saloon."

Not hesitating, Burgess stepped toward the door. He noted a concerted stiffening of bodies as he reached the threshold, and stealthy movements of hands toward pistol butts. But he paid no attention to these signs of hostile expectation, continuing his progress toward the interior of the room.

There was a sullen movement as he stepped over the threshold; the men in the group near the door shifted slowly, permitting him to pass between them.

Inside, along the left wall, was a bar. Half a dozen men stood before it drinking. Burgess felt their eyes on him as he felt the gaze of half a dozen other men who were playing cards at a near-by table. In their glances was the same cold and unmistakable hostility that had been in the eyes of the others.

Behind the bar a huge man, bearded, unkempt; with a truculent, twisting mouth and bleared, belligerent eyes, looked inquiringly at Burgess as the latter faced him.

" Your best," said Burgess, meeting the man's intent gaze. He turned, carelessly, and many glances that had been boring into his back were shifted to his face. For an instant he stood silent, looking from one to another of them with a frank, engaging smile.

" Surge up, gentlemen," he said then. " It's my treat."

For an instant there was a silence. Burgess wheeled slowly and filled a glass from a bottle that the barkeeper had set before him. For a little space, during which Burgess set the bottle down and looked speculatively at the glass he held in hand, the silence continued, and it seemed that his invitation was not to be accepted. Then a chair grated on the floor, a step sounded, and a man walked to the bar and stood beside Burgess.

Burgess turned to him, grinning.

" I reckoned that maybe I'd have to drink alone," he said.

" Hell," said the other. " The gang was sizin' you up, I reckon. Strangers don't usual brace in here an' blow the house without sendin' in visitin' cards."

Feet were scuffing and spurs jangling while Burgess and the other had been talking, and now the bar was fringed with men who, while busying themselves with glasses and bottles, betrayed their interest in Burgess by watching and craning their necks to overhear what was being said.

Burgess had glanced twice at the first man who had accepted his invitation. He was of medium height—the top of his head reaching Burgess's chin.

He was broad and muscular, though slim at the waist, and there was a lithe gracefulness in his attitude as he leaned on the bar—one elbow resting on its top, the hand supporting his head as he boldly scrutinized Burgess—which indicated ease of movement and perfect confidence in himself.

His was a strong face, lean and resolute looking, and his eyes were steady and unblinking, with just the slightest glint of cold humor in them as they met those of Burgess.

"I'm some short of cards, myself, this morning," said Burgess. "Didn't have time to go to the printer."

The other watched him steadily, and at last, noting the grimly humorous gleam in Burgess's eyes, he smiled, drawling.

"Sort of crowded, eh?"

"Some. Last I saw of town she was vanishing some rapid to the rear, and me urging her on, plenty."

"Sheriff?"

Burgess nodded.

"Dal Coleman and me had a falling out. I had to plug him."

The steady eyes of the other glowed; his lips set into straight lines. He looked at Burgess with increased interest.

"You're the guy that downed Coleman, eh? An' cleaned up Mogridge an' Dawley! The news of that little rumpus has reached us. Discussin' it—pro an' con—we've reached the conclusion that you done a damn' good job—good an' necessary. Dal Coleman was an ornery rat who would have made trouble for us—if he'd had the nerve."

The speaker drained his glass.

"My name's Kuneen," he said lowly. His voice dropped still lower, so that the man next to Burgess could not hear it, "Figgerin' to throw in with us?".

A gleam in Burgess's eyes answered the question, and Kuneen straightened, speaking aloud:

"Denby ain't here now. He's gone—somewhere. If you want to see him—bad; why you'll have to hang around 'til mornin', I reckon. Needn't worry you none; these boys is good company."

He swept a hand around the room and stepped outward, indicating Burgess with a jerk of the thumb.

"Boys," he said when he had got the attention of the men at the bar; "this here is a guy called Slow Burgess—the feller that slipped Dal Coleman the ace he'd ought to have had long ago. Slow ain't allowin' he's carin' to hang around Paro no longer since he's had the mix-up with Dawley and Mogridge, an' I reckon he's got thoughts of talkin' serious with Denby. Denby's gone, so I'm bunkin' Slow to-night."

Ten minutes later, after Burgess had again called for drinks for the "house," Kuneen led the way out of the saloon. Half-way down the row of shanties on the side where they were walking, Kuneen halted and, pointing between two buildings, showed Burgess a cabin of more than double the size of any of the others, well built, surrounded by trees that made an inviting shade.

"That's Denby's shack," he said. "Lives there with Belle Carson—his—his wife." He grinned at Burgess. "Belle is a winner, an' Denby's mushheaded over her. Jealous? Gentlemen, be ca'm!" He looked sharply at Burgess, with a subtle, humorous devil dancing in his eyes. "I expect that's one reason Denby won't like you," he added. "Besides," he continued after a short pause; "you're too cussed-lookin'; you ain't used to bein' bossed."

He led Burgess into the last shanty of the row. It was scantily furnished, but was clean at least, and Burgess found nothing to complain of in his first quick glance of inspection.

"You'll bunk here to-night—if you stay," said Kuneen. "You'll stay, if you want to, for Denby never turns a man out. If he don't like you—" Kuneen made an expressive gesture. "That's the end of it. No argument there, is there?"

Already it had become plain to Burgess that Kuneen had not brought him to his shack merely to show him his bunk, for there was in the man's manner a definite, though controlled eagerness that was unmistakable to Burgess. He was not surprised when Kuneen dragged a bench to the open doorway and sat upon it, motioning Burgess to do likewise.

Twisting around so that he could look straight into Burgess's eyes, he said very gravely:

"What's behind your comin' here, Burgess?"

Burgess returned his look. The wrinkles around his eyes deepened—as they always did when his thoughts were quizzical.

"Just feeling a little desperate, I reckon," he said.

"Bah!" exclaimed the other and met Burgess's look with one of scornful incredulity.

"I've sized you up," said Kuneen, after a little. "You don't run to the plug-ugly style no more than I run to it. You ain't no damn' fool—nor I ain't. If Dawley was after you, you had plenty of time to get out of the country. Where was you?"

"Holed up—in the brush back in the hills—getting cured. Mogridge nailed me."

"Too thin," mocked Kuneen. "I saw Della Bowen draggin' you away from the water-hole the day Mogridge plugged you."

Burgess's face had not changed expression at this startling bit of news.

"Where were you when she was dragging me?" he asked.

"Back in the timber."

"And you didn't offer to help her? Don't tell me you'd stand and let a woman—"

"Shucks!" said the other. "Della Bowen has drawed the line right sharp for this here outfit. There ain't none of them that can be prodded nearer than a mile to the Bowen shack. I seen you twice, after that. Both times you was kind of weak an' tottery. Now you've got solid on your pins an' you come here, instead of hittin' the breeze to some place where Dawley can't get his hands on you. Come clean. It ain't no use to try to run no whizzer in on yours truly."

Burgess smiled saturninely.

"Dawley would be lonesome if I left the country now," he said.

Kuneen sat silent, carefully digesting the remark.

"Well, yes," he said finally, "I reckon you *would* be gettin' even with Dawley. I don't wish you no bad luck, but I'm hopin' I beat you to it!"

He sat clenching and unclenching his hands, his face flushed, except for around the lips where the flesh was white and the muscles tensed; his eyes glowing with passion.

"Dawley and you are friends, I reckon," said Burgess.

Kuneen laughed harshly.

"Friends. Guess again. I had a little ranch over there—the Bar K. Five hundred head. Dawley busted me—wide open. Rustled my stock, burned my buildings; and when I kicked showed me a fake bill of sale sayin' my stock had been rustled from another man. My talk riled him. He sent Mogridge after me, figgerin' to try out the new jail. I let daylight through one of Mogridge's deputies an' since then I've been dodgin' around here. Don't dare to go back to Paro. Same as you."

"Any more of Dawley's friends here?" asked Burgess.

"Plenty. There's two kinds here—them that's bad because it's in their system, an' them that's bad because Dawley's clawed all the good out of them. There ain't no love lost between the two factions. There's bad blood an' it's gettin' worse.

"Denby don't take no side. He's a bloodthirsty devil, an' likes a shootin' match. He'll egg 'em on, an' grin when the shootin' begins. The bad guys here are bad all over. They've drifted in from all over the country—gun-fighters, rustlers, tin-horns.

"They're itchin' for a fight all the time, an' pinin' away to shadows if they don't get one. If they can't start anything with some unoffendin' guy they'll pick onto each other."

The speaker glanced downward at Burgess's two guns, tied suggestively to the legs of his chaps to facilitate their rapid removal.

"One gun is an irritation to most of the guys that hang around here," he said; "but two is a standin' invitation to certain trouble. There ain't but one man packs two in this here camp—an' his name is Flash Denby. He sure can sling 'em', an' the gang knows it. If you ain't a lightnin' flash at gettin' 'em out, an' a he-wolf for workin' 'em, once they *are* out, you'd better chuck one an' be mighty careful how you wear the other!"

"Shucks," said Burgess gently. "I've packed them so long, and now you're telling me to desert one of them. I never bother trouble till it comes wooing me," he laughed. He stood up. "You got a place where I can put my horse, Kuneen? Well, I reckon I'll put him there, then," he added, when Kuneen mentioned a lean-to behind the shack.

Burgess stepped out of the door, and, with Kuneen trailing him, walked toward the hitching-rail where he had left his horse and around which a group of men was now standing, laughing and talking.

CHAPTER IX.

THE GUN-FIGHT.

AGAIN, as Burgess appeared on the street, he became aware of watchers in doors and windows. In the atmosphere of the cache a strange hush had come, a flat, dead silence full of grave import.

Even the crowd around the horses at the hitching-rail, having noticed Burgess's approach, had ceased talking and laughing. Some of the men had retreated from the hitching-rail, and were now standing with their backs against the rough board front of Joe's saloon. Others were still lingering near the horses, but all, even though some appeared not to be looking at Burgess, had their faces turned toward him.

All, except one, who, his thumbs stuck in his cartridge-belt, the fingers of both hands brushing the butts of his gun with a lingering movement, as though he loved them, was facing Darkey and rocking slowly back and forth on his heels and toes.

The man was tall, lean and sinewy, with a thin, wolfish face. His cheek-bones were high, his lips thin, his eyes black and shaded with heavy, dark brows, and his hair, straight and coarse as an Indian's—and black also—had been long uncut. It hung, its scraggly ends uncombed, over his ears, and down the back of his neck.

Walking slowly toward the hitching-rail, Burgess saw the man. His eyes blazed with a sudden, wanton fire. As suddenly, the fire went out of them and was succeeded by a gleam of saturnine amusement, and he continued to go forward, apparently unaware of the presence of the man.

Several times during his voluntary exile Burgess had witnessed scenes of which, he had no doubt, this was to be a counterpart. Sometimes he had seen it happen to others; three or four times it had happened to him.

Always, in centers of human habitation beyond the region of the law, the stranger is considered the legitimate prey of certain types of men. Occasionally the affair turned out to be farcical, if not ludicrous. But more often such clashes resulted in tragedy. Yet, inevitably, the stranger entering the average cow town was subjected to indignities which were intended to give the established inhabitants an idea of his character. He was "sized up," in the idiomatic phraseology of the country; the standard by which he was judged being always a dissolute, quarrelsome resident, notoriously fast in drawing his weapons.

Williams's cache, a rendezvous for the lawless element of a dozen counties; the haven of men whose instincts and impulses moved them to violate and to resist authority, would size up a stranger also. Burgess had expected it, and had been mildly surprised that it had not been attempted while he had been inside the saloon.

Kuneen, as he trailed Burgess, whispered at his back, when for an instant he got Burgess between him and the crowd in front of the saloon:

"Look out! It's Tulerosa! He's layin' for you!"

"Thanks." Burgess's lips did not move. Smiling faintly, moving forward with an unconcerned swing, not seeming to see Tulerosa, but in reality noting his every movement out of the corners of his eyes, he walked to the hitching-rail and began to untie Darkey.

"That your cayuse, stranger?"

With one hand resting on the reins that were still knotted around the hitching-rail, the other hand hanging idly by his side, Burgess turned and looked at Tulerosa.

The latter was standing, his leg asprawl, his thumbs still hooked in his cartridge-belt. His thin lips were writhing in a sneer, one corner of his mouth having taken on an upward slant, malignant and bitter.

“ Mine?” said Burgess. “ You’ve said something.”

“ Had him long?” pursued Tulerosa.

“ Long enough to know he’s mine,” answered Burgess.

He looked at Tulerosa steadily across the space that separated them. Tulerosa did not change expression or position. With a contemptuous shrug of his shoulders, Burgess turned his back to the man and began to untie the knot in Darkey’s reins.

Then Tulerosa’s voice came over his shoulder, cold and insulting:

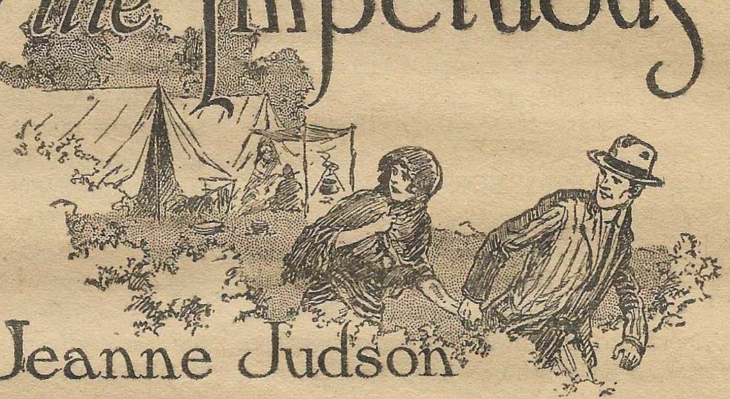
“Well, he’s too good a cayuse for a chromo like you to fork!”

(To be continued NEXT WEEK.)

Peter the Impetuous

by

Jeanne Judson



THERE was a hint of autumn in the clear air. The aroma of the woods rose in the curling smoke of camp-fires, mingling with the savory smell of the evening meal, which the gipsies were cooking in big, black kettles.

It was a busy hour in camp. The soft thud of the horses’ feet and the hoarse calls of men to men, as they compared the day’s trading made a sound of bustle, while crackling fires lit up the fast-gathering gloom, and shone with reflected splendor from the bright caps and shawls of the women, or glistened for a moment on sparkling earrings and coin necklaces.

Slightly apart from the scene of activity sat a man and a woman, Turk fashion, on a red and black blanket.

Outside a gipsy camp, the woman would have been a girl, for she was only seventeen years old. Her hair was more chestnut than black, but the skin of her oval face and little hands was as dark a brown as that of any gipsy in the band.

The man with her was dark also, but it was the darkness of the northern climes. He was dressed in a trimly-tailored suit of gray. His dark hair was brushed back from a broad, high forehead, beneath which were rather somber, gray-black eyes. The face was long and would have looked very melancholy had it not been for the mouth, which had a redeeming upward curve.

The man was Peter the Impetuous, so named by a fellow-worker on the Knoxville *Globe.*

Peter, strange as it may seem, was not a reporter from necessity, but from choice. His mother was richly endowed with this world’s goods and would have been glad to have Peter remain a useless though somewhat decorative adjunct to local society.

But Peter liked newspaper work. It was so full of emergencies in which he could make impulsive decisions, which no matter how right they seemed at the time, usually turned out to be wrong on the following day. The police beat was a world of adventure to Peter, for under the magic spell of his vivid imagination, every "drunk" and "disorderly" became an Omar Khayyam.

Just now Peter was amply justifying his nickname. He had come across the gipsy camp three days before and had written a newspaper story about it, featuring Lolita, the charming seeress who now engaged his attention.

After the story was published he had gone out to see how Lolita had liked it. At first he was a bit disappointed to find that Lolita, who did not read newspapers, had not even seen it, but this disappointment was soon swallowed up in the pleasure he derived from reading it to her. Peter always loved to read anything he had written himself, and with the added stimulus of a pair of melting, black eyes and glimpses of white teeth that flashed from time to time between red lips curved in a coquettish smile, he felt that he was indeed a literary genius. He had no need to ask her how she liked the story. Her appreciative glances were enough.

This was Peter's third visit to the camp. The gipsies were to move next day and he wanted a last chat with Lolita. It was refreshing to talk to this beautiful, lithe creature, so close to nature, so free from affectation and conventions.

Lolita threw away the remains of her cigarette and touched Peter's hand lightly. It was the caressing gesture of an affectionate kitten, but Peter thrilled to it as he had never thrilled to a woman's touch before. He felt a mad desire to lift her hand to his lips and cover it with passionate kisses.

"I will tell your fortune, Señor Peter," she cooed, holding his hand and looking into the palm.

"You have a long life, full of great honors," she began. "You are rich but you are not happy. Your people do not understand you. Is it not so?"

Peter nodded sadly, or as sadly as possible while Lolita had his hand in hers. She was beautiful; and so original—so different from Janet Quentin and the other girls he knew.

"Ah, I see it all now," continued Lolita. "There is a blond woman."

"Indeed there is," thought Peter, but this time he did not nod.

"She loves you."

"I'm not so sure of that," said Peter.

"Yes, she does love you," insisted Lolita, attempting to frown at his interruption, "but you will not marry her."

"You're right there," broke in Peter again. "The relatives are all too keen for it. Janet is all very well as a friend, but when I marry it must be some one with fire and romance—a girl who has not been cramped by conventions and finishing-schools—some one who will understand me."

Peter thought this speech worth remembering.

"The lady you will marry is very dark and beautiful," continued Lolita in a low tone. "I cannot see her plainly yet."

She bent closer over his palm, her face very near Peter's, her dark hair almost touching his cheek.

"She is not a great lady," she proceeded.

"Yet she is of royal blood," said Peter, intoxicated with a fascinating thought that had just come to him.

"Do you know who I mean?" asked Lolita, her great eyes looking straight into his with questioning innocence.

"It is you," said Peter, "it is you!"

Lolita started and would have dropped his hand, but he was holding hers now.

"You are of royal blood, the daughter of a gipsy king, yet you are lowly too in your white tents."

The tents were not white. They had not been white since they left winter quarters in Chicago, but Peter never noticed unpleasant details.

"Lo-li-ta, Lo-la," called the harsh voice of one of the women at the fire in the center of the camp.

"I must go; they are calling me," said Lolita.

"Not until you have promised to marry me."

Peter still held her hand.

"I can't; I am betrothed to Manuel," said Lolita rising, and half-pulling Peter, who would not relinquish her hand, with her.

"You will never marry him. You are born for me," declared Peter. "You surely don't love him."

"You can't marry a gipsy," parried Lolita.

"I can marry whom I choose. Do you love Manuel?"

The girl looked at Peter. He was very handsome, and certainly he wore beautiful clothes, and was doubtless very rich.

"I do not know," she said at last. "Manuel is very good at the horse trade—he is a good match."

"Nonsense. If you do not know, you do not love him. You would be as dull with Manuel as I would be with Janet—"

"Who is Janet?" There was jealousy in her eyes.

"No one who matters. It is only you and I that count. We will put romance into each other's lives. When the band moves in the morning you must not be with them. I will come to-night and wait for you on the road across this field. You will come to me as soon as you can slip away unnoticed."

"Lo-li-ta, Lo-li-ta!" The call was louder this time and followed by a string of Romany curses.

"Promise." His eyes held hers insistently.

"I will be there," and as Peter released her hand she ran lightly toward the campfire. Peter watched her for a minute and then started off across the open field, in which the tents were pitched, toward the road beyond.

He passed a group of men and horses. One of the men, a handsome fellow, with big, black eyes, and a picturesque though not overclean handkerchief tied around his head, shook his fist after Peter's retreating figure and muttered something, but Peter walked on all unconscious of his displeasure. The man was Manuel.

Even the oldest of Peter's friends would have stared in amazement if they had seen him that night, speeding down the quiet streets of Knoxville at twelve o'clock in his high-powered car with a frightened-looking gipsy girl beside him. The car stopped in front of Peter's home and Lolita, unaccustomed to gallantries from the sterner sex, and still frightened at her unusual experience, was on the pavement beside him before he had time to offer assistance. He took her arm and led her into the house.

Peter had anticipated a dramatic entrance, but the big library was empty. He went to his mother's room, but her maid told him that Mrs. Acton had not yet got back from the Van Lueven's dance, so he returned to the library where he had left Lolita. He found her standing in the center of the room weeping.

"What is it? What's wrong?" asked Peter much concerned.

"I'm afraid," sobbed Lolita. "It is so grand here? What will your mother say?"

Peter put his arms about her comfortingly.

"Don't be frightened. Mother will welcome you and we will be very happy.

The odor of her hair, like autumn leaves, the thought intoxicated him, yet he was ill at ease. He tried to make his tones reassuring, but, denied the dramatic entrance he had planned, his own courage was beginning to wane a bit. He made Lolita comfortable in a big, easy-chair and gave her some of his best monogrammed cigarettes, the value of which, he surmised all too correctly, Lolita did not appreciate at all.

Becoming somewhat accustomed to her surroundings Lolita curled up in the chair and went to sleep, while Peter sat regarding her, waiting. If she had not been so beautiful, her red lips half-parted, her dark, thick lashes lying on her cheeks, he would have begun to suspect that he had made a mistake.

Through the open doors he heard the sound of his mother's returning motor, and went out to meet her. Mrs. Acton was both pleased and surprised at this unusual attention from her son.

"Why, hello, Peter," she called cheerily. "Have you been waiting for me?"

"Yes, mother; I've got something important to tell you. Don't go in just yet. Sit here with me for a minute on the veranda."

"It's rather late!" She stifled a little yawn as she spoke. " Can't your news wait until to-morrow?"

" No; I must tell you now."

Mrs. Acton followed him up the steps and seated herself in a wide porch-chair that rested against one of the vine-wreathed pillars. She was a calm, self-possessed woman under all circumstances, but something in Peter's voice made her heart beat faster and she waited for him to speak with apprehension.

Peter had a very neat speech all ready, but in the agitation of the moment he forgot it.

" Mother, I'm going to be married." was the best he could think of.

" Oh, is that all?" said Mrs. Acton in a relieved tone. " I'm glad to hear it though. I thought you and Janet—"

" But it isn't Janet," interposed Peter.

" Oh!" said Mrs. Acton again, this time in a different tone. " Who then?"

" Her name is Lolita."

" Lolita? What an odd name, and what is the rest of it, and who is she? Where did you meet her?"

" I don't know what her last name is. I met her in a gipsy camp. She is the daughter of the king."

" You are ill, Peter; you have been working too hard," said his mother kindly.

" I'm not ill. I have met the only woman I will ever love. She is in the library asleep now. Please come in and welcome her, mother."

Mrs. Acton tried to rise, but sank back into her chair as she thought of an alarming possibility.

" Good Heavens, Peter, you aren't married already, are you?" she gasped.

" No, of course not, but I have brought my fiancée here. I couldn't leave her in a gipsy camp."

Somewhat relieved, but still doubtful of her son's sanity, Mrs. Acton followed him to the library. In the doorway she stopped, wide eyed, gazing at the picturesque creature sleeping among the leather pillows.

" Isn't she beautiful?" asked Peter in a whisper.

" Yes," was the answer. " It's a masquerade costume, isn't it, Peter?" There was an expression of faint hope in Mrs. Acton's eyes.

" No, mother, of course not," said Peter a bit impatiently. " She's a gipsy. She dresses that way all the time."

As if to verify his words, Lolita suddenly woke and scrambled to her feet, blinking in the strong light. The first object that met her eyes was the form of Mrs. Acton. Before she recalled where she was, her instinctive mind told her just what to do when she met a woman of this class.

" Tell your fortune, lady?" she whined in a voice just a little husky from sleep.

Then she saw Peter, a look of despair on his face, and remembered everything. She ran to him, and burying her head on his shoulder, burst into tears.

" Please don't cry; it's only mother," said Peter. " Can't you speak to her, mother?"

But Mrs. Acton stood silent, apparently frozen with horror. Her mind, however, was working rapidly.

" Thank God, Janet Quentin is out of town," she thought. " The girl must be away before she returns, and no one must know."

When at last Lolita's sobs were in a measure controlled, Mrs. Acton spoke to her.

" Come, Lolita," she said in the kindest voice she could assume. " Peter has told me all about you, and you are very welcome. But it is too late to talk any more to-night. I will take you to your room and we can wait till to-morrow to get better acquainted."

She led the frightened girl away without saying good night to Peter, but in his gratitude for her kindness to Lolita, he did not observe this small slight to himself.

He slept that night, but in two other rooms two women lay awake till daylight —Lolita kept from slumber by her unusual surroundings, the softness of the bed and the curious shut-in feeling which she had in the well-ventilated room; Mrs. Acton by the schemes that animated her brain, for extracting her son from his latest escapade.

Peter did not see either of them at breakfast. He had wakened with a distinct feeling that all was not right with the world. This feeling was increased when, at luncheon-time, he returned to his home, to find Lolita attired in some garments belonging to his mother's maid, the only things in the house that would fit her.

Lolita's beauty was not enhanced by the habiliments of civilization, and—he could not deny it—he did not like the way Lolita late. He wondered that his mother did not seem to mind.

" We must have some friends in to meet Lolita," she was saying.

" Not until we get her some clothes." The words were spoken before he thought.

Instantly Lolita's face flushed with anger and her eyes filled with tears.

" You are ashamed of me; you do not want to introduce me to your fine friends."

" Nonsense, Lolita." His tone was almost impatient. " I am proud of you. It is for your own sake that I want you to appear at your best."

But Lolita fled from the table weeping, and, groaning inwardly, Peter followed her to offer apologies. At last she dried her tears.

" I am afraid of your mother," she confided to him. " She is a great lady."

" You will love her when you know her better," Peter assured her, but he was by no means certain himself. It occurred to him that Mrs. Acton was treating Lolita almost too courteously to make her feel at home. Lolita of the white tents was wonderful, but Lolita dressed in the clothing of her mother's maid was far different.

He observed for the first time that beside his mother's fine skin, Lolita's looked coarse. Her hands, too. They were small enough, but the nails were so uncared for.

Long before the last edition of the Knoxville *Globe* was on the streets, Peter's unhappiness had become almost unbearable. He didn't love Lolita. He had ceased loving her the moment he saw her eat. It was terrible to think of living with her always, but he was determined to do the right thing. He had persuaded her to run away with him and he would see it through.

He could not understand the attitude of his mother. Why hadn't she made a scene? Lolita was proud. Perhaps she would have refused to stay if Mrs. Acton had made it plain that she was unwelcome, but his mother seemed to approve of her.

His mind was tortured, too, with thoughts of Janet Quentin. What would she say or think when she met Lolita? What would all of his friends think? He had received a letter from Janet the day before but he had scarcely glanced at it. Now he took it from his pocket and read it carefully, seeking consolation.

It was in no sense a love-letter. Just chatter about mutual friends, and something at the end about being dull and wishing that Peter would come down to Sandhurst Beach for the week-end, to relieve the monotony.

" What a wonderful letter," thought Peter. " How perfectly Janet and I understand each other; but it can't make any difference now. I have ruined my life."

It was with lagging footsteps and a heavy heart that he returned to the house that evening. His mother met him at the door, a well-simulated expression of anxiety on her face.

" I am so worried about Lolita, Peter, dear," she said. " I sent her out shopping right after luncheon and she has not returned. I dare say I should have gone with her, but I wanted her to exercise her own taste in the things she bought. I did not wish her to feel that I did not trust her judgment. She should have been here an hour ago."

" She'll come back all right," said Peter hopelessly, but his mother appeared not to observe his tone.

" I'm afraid not, Peter. You see, I sent her in the car, and Anton has returned without her. He said she left the car and entered one of the shops. He waited there until the shop closed and when she did not return he came back here. I gave her five hundred dollars to buy things, and I am terribly worried for fear something has happened to her.

" You must go out and see what you can do. I don't like to notify the police. They might not understand. You know, Peter," she continued as he still sat silent, " you are responsible for her. She is so free from conventions, so fresh and unspoiled, so unworldly—a fragile wood-flower. I feel very guilty about the whole matter."

Peter looked closely at his mother, but there was no trace of sarcasm in her voice or expression.

"I'll go out at once and see if I can find her. The town is too small for any one to get lost, and I never heard of any one being robbed in daylight in Knoxville."

"Please do, Peter; I sha'n't know a moment's peace until I find out what has happened to her." This time Mrs. Acton was quite sincere. She watched Peter depart with a quiet smile.

As Peter had said, the town was small—the business section all confined to one square near the railway station. He had little heart for his search, but walked through the streets mechanically, looking from side to side.

There were few people about at this hour. Only around the railway station were the usual crowds. Moodily and with unseeing eyes Peter watched them, until something in a group of people walking toward the day-coach of an outgoing train caught and held his attention. The something was a bright-colored handkerchief wrapped around the head of a tall man.

Peter looked again, this time with wide-open eyes. Beside the man was a woman who walked with a free, swinging step. There was a shawl over her head, but he could catch a glimpse of olive skin and smiling red lips. Peter hesitated a moment, then followed them, overtaking them before they could reach the train.

He touched Lolita's arm and called her name. She turned quickly, while Manuel put a possessive hand on her arm.

"I made a mistake—I want a real man—I do not love you. I can't live in houses." The words came quickly with backward glances lest the train pull out without them.

The sight of her thus with another man should have fanned the fire of Peter's infatuation into flame again, but there was no fire left. He said nothing.

"It is the money not the girl," said Manuel sneeringly.

Peter would have said something in dissent. Lolita was welcome to the five hundred. It was a cheap escape, but before he could speak Lolita answered him:

"As for the money—it is a fair exchange for the few kisses I gave."

"All aboard!" shouted a trainman, and Peter bowed gravely and happily as they scrambled into the car.

His mother was waiting when he returned.

"Lolita has gone back to her people," was all he said, and Mrs. Acton made no comment.

"I think I'll go down to Sandhurst Beach to-morrow for the week-end," he added irrelevantly.

HER PART

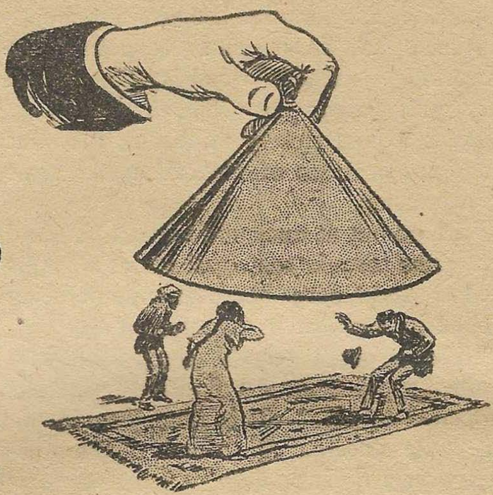
We women cannot con a ship
  Across the danger-zone,
Or sink a sneaking submarine,
  Or storm a fort of stone,
Or lead a charge with naked steel,
  Or loose a leaden rain—
But we can bind the soldier's wounds
  That he may fight again.

We cannot capture batteries,
  Or in the trenches lie,
Or cut barbed wire, or mine a hill,
  Or battle in the sky,
Or drop the bombs upon the foe,
  Or point the roaring guns,
Or bear the flag to victory—
  But we can give our sons!

Minna Irving.

Hushed Up

by Elizabeth York Miller



Author of "The Battle of the Weak," etc.

WHAT HAS ALREADY HAPPENED

HENRY ASHE was found in his home, badly wounded. Lilian Ashe, whom he had married when she was a stenographer, stated that a burglar fired the shot. Belle Crosby, a low-class girl who was found in the neighborhood, was questioned and let go.

Dr. Thorpe, who loved Anne Morris, Lilian Ashe's sister, was called in, but, despite his efforts and those of a famous surgeon, Henry Ashe died, after a ten-minute conversation alone with his wife, which seemed to make both of them almost happy.

Miss Gieve, the governess, acted suspiciously. Anne Morris found in the waste-basket a letter Miss Gieve had addressed but had not sent to Mrs. Ashe, stating that the widow had been seen to shoot her husband, and if she did not confess Miss Gieve meant to locate and hang the murderer.

Dr. Thorpe visited Belle Crosby in a low part of London, and left her, convinced that an ex-convict whom she loved, Peter the Less, had committed the murder. He was astounded, therefore, when Lilian Ashe confessed to him that she had shot her husband by mistake when a burglar had entered their apartment. Also he learned that the widow was trying to break herself of the opium habit.

Mrs. Ashe went to London, and Anne Morris was worried when she did not return on time. Miss Gieve confided her knowledge and fears to Dr. Thorpe; and Anne, seeing them together, grew jealous. Miss Gieve came to dinner, at which Dr. Thorpe was present, in an extremely attractive gown. Then a telegram arrived from Mrs. Ashe stating that she would not return that night.

CHAPTER XIV.

PETER THE LESS.

THE receipt of Lilian Ashe's message did not in the least decrease Anne's anxiety. It was so unlike Lilian—indeed, everything had been unlike Lilian since the night of the tragedy.

Aldgate— The telegram had been turned in at Aldgate.

There was a resemblance between this night and the night Harry died, when Miss Gieve had returned so late and dropped a Commercial Road tram ticket, after saying she had been to Hampstead. And there was that accusation Miss Gieve had made against Lilian in the letter that Lilian had never read. Aldgate and the Commercial Road and Limehouse, where Rodney Thorpe had visited a patient, were they not all connected by locality?

If it could be true that Lilian had a secret lover, would she be meeting him in that neighborhood? But Anne would stake her soul that it was not true. Harry and Lilian had been lovers as well as husband and wife. They had been ideally happy.

Anne was in a position to know that, and, apart from Harry, she had herself shared Lilian's life for the past ten years.

The mystery which began the night of the tragedy was a hydra-headed monster. It was useless to slay one aspect of it. Another bobbed up immediately. Here now

This story began in The Argosy for March 23.

was this telegram that told so little and might conceal so much.

Anne thrust it into the front of her dress and went to the door. Miss Gieve would have reached the station by this time. Anne hoped she wouldn't wait for trains.

The night was luminous with stars and filled with the scent of roses and the whisperings of lovers. The latter saved it from loneliness. It was the favorite hour for their strollings. A little later, perhaps, it would be very lonely.

In her deep anxiety Anne's heart turned again to Rodney Thorpe. She could not wait for him to come to her. He didn't realize how serious it might be; and Anne felt that she needed him. Deep in her consciousness she needed his love as much as his advice.

She had been jealous and miserable. She wanted to forget that—weep on his shoulder and let him comfort her. They were as good as betrothed. It had been silly of her to deny that formality while admitting his right to hold her in his arms and kiss her. Of what does a betrothal consist? Of what more can it consist between two people who love each other than the tender caresses which express their love. And if she were going to be everlastingly jealous—of a forward young governess—

She stepped out into the night as she was and walked the short distance to Dr. Thorpe's house, keeping an eye out meanwhile for Miss Gieve, who, however, could scarcely be expected to return so soon.

When she had entered the garden Anne turned into a side path toward the surgery entrance. The path led past the windows of the doctor's study, a cozy little room where he received his personal friends and occasionally patients. There were lights in the windows and the curtains had not been drawn.

Anne glanced in, then drew back into the shadows, her heart beating painfully. In another instant she would have stepped straight into the shaft of light.

She had not meant to spy on Rodney, but virtually that was what had happened.

The picture was stamped on her mind for all time. It seemed as though the end of the world had come.

There, in his study, sat Miss Gieve in all her green and silver finery, her cloak tossed aside, a cigarette held daintily in one hand, her knees crossed nonchalantly. She was looking up at the doctor with her heart in her eyes—an intense, earnest expression that could mean only one thing. Anne was not able to see his face, for he was standing with his back to the window, but his arms were spread in a gesture that might well have passed for pleading.

And then through the open window there floated out these remarks in Miss Gieve's clear, sweet voice:

" If I don't go now Miss Morris will get suspicious. I told her I was going to the station. I was really at my wit's ends to get away. She telephoned you, didn't she?"

" Yes. I said I'd come over later. She mustn't know you've been here—"

Anne waited to hear no more. Her instinct was to burst in on them, but she controlled it and turned away.

How could he be so contemptible? Was he worth crying about?

Anne's pride told her fiercely that he was not; nevertheless she wept. Miss Gieve would come in and find her weeping—well, she could say in all truth that she was worrying about her sister.

It was the most contemptible part of it all that those two should linger over a secret tryst when Lilian might be in grave danger. They did not care.

The governess came hurrying in breathless. There was a heightened air about her, an atmosphere which breathed exultation.

" They had no new time-tables," she said. " Of course there are several more trains to-night."

Anne, red-eyed, gazed at her stonily.

" I think you ought to ring up Dr. Thorpe again," Miss Gieve went on. " He might suggest something."

Anne's lips were dry. Did this girl or Rodney think she cared so much that she had to be systematically fooled?

" Oh, I had a telegram while you were out," she managed to say. " My sister is not coming home to-night."

" A telegram! She's stopping in town?"

"Yes."

"Well, it's a relief to know," said Miss Gieve.

Anne made no reply. She wished the girl would go away and leave her, but Miss Gieve evidently had no intention of doing that.

She rummaged around for a book, chattering in friendly fashion; but Anne knew she was watching with a wary eye.

"She's wondering if I suspect," thought Anne. "But of course she thinks I'm a fool. He thinks so, too."

Thorpe's brisk step sounded outside on the gravel path, accompanied by the cheery whistle with which he often signaled his arrival.

Miss Gieve let fall the book she had found, put it back on the shelf, and searched for another.

Thorpe stepped in through the long window.

"Hello, Anne, what's this you telephoned me about Lilian? Isn't she home yet? Good evening, Miss Gieve. You're looking very smart."

"Good evening, doctor," the governess replied demurely.

Anne's tired and cold gaze wandered from one to the other of them. The hypocrisy sickened her.

Why could she not cry out: "Liars—both of you?" Or something equally biting, but less vehement, perhaps.

Then her cruelly hurt pride suggested a better plan. They must not know how vitally she had been hurt. Neither of them should guess that she cared an atom for Rodney Thorpe. She would be matter-of-fact and ordinary.

"I had a telegram from Lilian. Would you care to see it?"

She handed it to him, and, to her disgust, the forward Miss Gieve coolly walked over and read it from behind his arm.

The girl had abandoned all idea of knowing her place, and the last thing Anne cared to do in the present circumstances was to remind her of it.

"Aldgate!" she whispered.

Anne caught the word. It had suggested something to the governess, just as it had to her.

Thorpe handed the telegram to her.

"Well, that's all right," he said easily. "Look here, Anne, I must get back. I've got a lot of things to do. You'd better go to bed. You look tired. I'm glad it's all right."

At the door he turned.

"Good night, Miss Gieve," he said.

Anne caught the look of understanding that flashed between them.

"Good night, doctor," Miss Gieve replied.

It was too much. Anne hurried up-stairs without another word. They were too absorbed in their newly-discovered passion for each other to give more than a passing thought to Lilian. There was nothing Anne could do unless she summoned the police. But then everything might be all right, as Rodney had assumed it was.

She went into Rosemary's room and crept to the bed, kneeling down to bury her face against the child's pillow.

"Is that you, mummy? I'm glad you've come home. Aunt Anne promised she'd wake me—"

Rosemary's voice trailed off drowsily, but her little hand stole out and caressed Anne's wet face.

Rodney Thorpe went back to his own house as fast as he could. A glance at his watch told him that it was still comparatively early—only a little after nine.

In twenty minutes he emerged again, and his best friend would scarcely have recognized him.

A smudge of burned cork on the lower part of his face gave him the appearance of a man who shaves only on Sundays. Substituting a colored handkerchief for a collar, and arrayed in a disreputable old tweed coat and a pair of trousers that he used ordinarily for gardening, he needed but an old golf cap to turn him into a desperate character.

Verily, clothes maketh the man. What the clothes, in themselves, failed to achieve was supplied by the suggested haze of beard and the knotted handkerchief.

He slunk out of his own house like the tough customer he looked. It was a blessing he was able to dodge Constable Judd who passed the gate a few seconds later. Otherwise he would probably have been taken into custody on sight.

Concealed upon his person was enough money to see him through an emergency, but his pockets contained only a handful of small change and a strong penknife. He did not dare take his revolver, for it might so easily get him into trouble.

He walked on until he reached the region of omnibuses and electric trams. There he entered a small shop and bought a box of matches and cigarettes.

Part of the distance he traveled by tram and part by the underground railway. Few people paid any attention to him. Those who did plainly did not approve of the sort of young man he had made himself into. He looked the typical East End rough, a character to avoid in the dark and watch in the daylight.

It was half past ten when he reached Limehouse and turned toward the river.

The narrow streets wore their usual semi-deserted air. Here and there a lamp lightened the gloom and revealed a pallid face that quickly melted away into the darkness, or the stealthy quick-moving figure of an Oriental.

Family quarrels there were in plenty—some from behind the dingy yellow blinds of the little houses; some at the corner by the public-house. The police seldom interfered between husband and wife unless the situation got too desperate; indeed, no policemen seemed to be in evidence at all once away from the main thoroughfare.

By this time one has guessed that Rodney Thorpe was as anxious as Anne to know what had become of Lilian, and that the telegram had not eased his mind at all.

There had seemed to him but one thing to do, and that was to pay another surprise visit to the waterside lodging-house. It was plain to him now that Lilian was connected in some way with those people. He could not guess how, but as so many straws pointed in that direction it must be the way of the wind.

According to Miss Gieve, Lilian had obtained both opium and morphia from some one in the East End of London.

Thorpe knew these traffickers. He knew their dens and the methods they used to supply victims with drugs at exorbitant charges. Not that the price mattered so much, but the traffic did, and it was so difficult to stamp it out. It had its subterranean ways spreading in all directions. Some of them reached even to Mayfair.

But the root of it all was here in Limehouse. The ships from the East carried things that were not in the bills of lading, and the smugglers had each his particular partner on shore, generally a yellow-faced man whose hands were deft at giving and taking, and whose loose cotton blouse could be made to cover more sin than abided in his heart.

If such an anomaly can be, some of the opium dens were more respectable than others. There was the one kept by Ah Fing behind his basement laundry that in its day had been the show place of the neighborhood.

Many times, while he was working down here, Thorpe had gone to Ah Fing's to drag forth a wretched lad of his acquaintance, a medical student who had fallen a victim to the curiosity of his knowledge.

He shuddered to think of Lilian Ashe in connection with it, but he knew the fiendish power of the drug, and if she had perchance been introduced to it at Ah Fing's she might go back there. In the old days taxicab parties from the West End were not uncommon. Among a certain rash sporting set it was the acme of dissipation to pay a visit to Ah Fing's.

Thorpe found the place without difficulty. It was still flourishing, apparently, for when he held up two fingers to the pigtailed Celestial hard at work over a steaming ironing board the latter grunted and pointed to a door at the back.

The door led into an interior which need not be described in detail. A part of it was devoted to a sort of bar, a long table with shelves behind it stacked with unpleasant-looking bottles and thick tumblers not over clean.

A foreign sailor with an ugly scar decorating one side of his face and a youth of the district far gone in consumption leaned against the bar, chatting with Ah Fing.

Thorpe cast a quick glance in the direction of the bunks that lined the walls. The fashionable element was lacking to-night. Only three of the bunks were occupied, and two of those by Chinamen. The third contained a bundle of rags that seemed to breathe. It might once have been a woman.

Thorpe slouched up to the bar and was scrutinized closely by Ah Fing, a fat old rascal with a drooping gray mustache and an oily, misleading manner. He did not recognize the doctor, but he knew at once that he was in the presence of a masquerader.

"Me Dr. Thorpe. You know me, Ah Fing?" Thorpe said.

"Know you heapee well. Know you allee samee right away," the Chinaman replied promptly, breaking into a relieved grin. "Long time you comee along by me; eh?" He made no remark on the doctor's disguise, accepting it as such without comment.

"Allee samee long time," agreed Thorpe. "Whisky, you savee, Ah Fing!"

Ah Fing "saveed." The bottle he produced was an exclusive one and came from under the bar. It bore a familiar label, and, as such refreshments go, might be warranted nonpoisonous. Then, in further deference to his customer's superiority, the Chinaman caught up a glass and deftly cleaned it with the slack of his blouse.

"My treat. Chin-chin!" said Thorpe.

Ah Fing accepted the invitation, and also partook from the exclusive bottle.

The sailorman and the dying gutter-rat eyed the newcomer furtively. They looked him up and down, their glances coming finally to rest on his hands which he had neglected to disguise. They were much too well kept for the rest of him. The sailor laughed and said something to his companion, who sniffed contemptuously.

Thorpe was not in the least interested in them. He had come into this horrible place for one purpose only, and that was to find Lilian Ashe. He had not actually expected to find her here, but if she had come to London's Chinatown in search of the drug and been smitten by it somewhere in the locality old Ah Fing was the one person who might know where to find her.

He was a thorough rascal, a law-breaker of the most vile order, but in himself he was not vile and he had so many good points and was so useful to them that the police were his friends rather than his enemies.

Thorpe came directly to the point when the "chin-chins" had been observed.

"Me searchee one English moll — fine, lovely. Dress all samee Bond Street: yellow top-knot, pinkee face: all samee fine lady—you savee?"

This sounds a rather disrespectful and inadequate description of Lilian Ashe, but as far as it went Ah Fing comprehended it.

"Not here. No time at all come here," he replied conclusively.

"You know maybe where find him," suggested the doctor, making, according to pidgin-English custom, a universal sex of the masculine.

"Me not know at all," replied Ah Fing. "Friend of yours, maybe?"

"Yes—one big all samee friend."

"Smokee the pipe, maybe?"

"Maybe."

"Muchee bad. Tell him no good. You, doctor. Tell him lady friend muchee bad —damn bad! Makee face all samee gold like top-knot. Lady keep him face pinkee —muchee better."

This sounded good sense, and it came from one who knew what he was talking about. The effect was spoiled a little by Ah Fing's waddling off to see to the opium lamp that showed signs of flickering. He called sharply to his boy to attend to it and to the wants of a man in one of the bunks who had started to shiver and groan.

There followed a vivid but unintelligible flow of Chinese treble between the proprietor and his assistant, accompanied by the bass groans of the neglected customer.

The sailor and his companion turned to watch with lackadaisical interest. It amused them faintly to see the boy get a cuff over the head and hear his yelp of pain.

Then the door from outside opened and there strolled in a well-dressed man, handsome in his way, and undoubtedly impressed with himself as vastly superior to all and sundry. His little mustache had been carefully waxed, but here and there on his dark face there were marks of recent cuts, and one—not quite healed—was protected with a strip of plaster.

Thorpe needed but one glance to be assured that here was the famous Peter the Less.

CHAPTER XV.

THE DOCTOR'S QUEST.

THORPE felt that he would have recognized the man anywhere. His type, too, was recognizable, for he was not in a class by himself. He was the flashy, conceited, dandified, lady-killing type of the lower criminal orders. Ten chances to one it was vanity which had led to his undoing every time the law caught him.

"A mongrel," was Thorpe's sharp mental comment.

Ah Fing was annoyed when the newcomer greeted him.

"You come allee samee here, pig-head!" the Oriental exclaimed. "You go allee samee quick out of here. You no friend to Ah Fing. You, Black Peter, get hanged maybe one day."

So it was the man. Black Peter was one of the names by which he was known, but Thorpe preferred to think of him by the more picturesque title of Peter the Less.

The newcomer lit a cigarette, surveyed the company with apparent carelessness, and demanded a plug of opium. Ah Fing's speech appeared to have made no impression on him.

The old Chinaman, grunting and mumbling to himself, produced what was required, and Peter the Less flung a half-sovereign on the counter in payment.

Then he turned to go, pausing at the door to remark:

"On the day I'm hanged there'll be two corpses rotting in the paupers' burying-ground—one of 'em 'll be you and the other 'll be that moon-faced wife of yours. You mind your business and I'll mind mine. See?"

The sailor laughed and the consumptive gutter-rat was caught in a spasm of coughing for attempting to do the same.

Ah Fing turned purple with rage, and an angry Chinaman is something to see. The boy he had just cuffed joined with him in a high falsetto of denunciation, ~~and the~~ air was murky with Chinese curses.

The man at the door favored them with a sneering smile, but when Ah Fing, goaded by the sting of that smile, picked up a bottle by its neck, he slipped through the door and closed it after him just in time. The Chinaman had meant murder, and the bottle crashed against the panel at about the height of a man's head.

This seemed to clear the atmosphere, for everything calmed down at once.

The foreign sailor and the ill youth slouched over to the lamp to cook their "pills," and Ah Fing mopped the sweat of indignation from his brow with the sleeve of his blouse.

"Him one bad man; all samee makee mischief. Me no like," he said.

Thorpe settled down with his arms on the bar and became confidential.

Why did Ah Fing dislike Peter the Less? They were both tarred with the brush of disrepute.

Principally, it seemed, because Peter was "in trouble," and Ah Fing, though friends with the police himself, did not court frequent visits from them. In his vernacular he explained fully.

Peter the Less was hiding somewhere in the neighborhood. There was a girl living in the same house where Ah Fing himself lodged, who had been suspected of harboring him, but now they said she was married to another man.

"What's he in trouble about?" Thorpe asked.

Ah Fing did not know exactly. There had been a burglary committed in a suburb and the master of the house was killed defending his property. The police had connected Peter the Less with this crime. The ways of the police were mysterious. They had only to see the thumb-print of a man to know exactly who he was. Perhaps that was how they fastened on Peter.

The doctor was genuinely perplexed. To a certain extent he could trust Ah Fing, particularly after the demonstration of hatred he had just witnessed. But there was something more that delicacy forbade mentioning. Ah Fing's wife had come in for a share of Peter's threat, and you can't question an Oriental about his wife. It simply isn't done.

Thorpe was reminded of the little Chinawoman, courteous and curious, who had told him where to find Belle Crosby. There was some reason to believe that she was Ah Fing's wife.

And then it seemed as though Fate, with special intention, stepped in to give the doctor a helping hand.

Thorpe had not, for instance, the remotest idea in what esteem Ah Fing held his wife. If he asked about her living in the house where the Crosby girl lived and what she had the chance to observe, *et cetera,* the old Chinaman, with the criss-cross mind of the Oriental, might easily imagine that the question covered a secret admiration of Mrs. Ah Fing.

Following upon that he might do either of two things: be deeply offended, or offer to sell her on the spot. It depended altogether upon how fond of her he was. Thorpe wished to keep in the old man's good graces, and he had no designs upon Mrs. Ah Fing other than soliciting her assistance in finding Lilian.

It was here that Fate stepped in, taking the form of a yellow boy clad from his waist up in the European fashion, but wearing the baggy trousers and straw matting house-slippers of his own race.

He entered hurriedly with a message for Ah Fing which seemed of vital concern. The boy who was attending the lamp joined them, and all three conferred—Ah Fing asking questions in a manner of deep distress, the assistant wringing his hands and groaning as though the news was too awful to be borne, and the newcomer insisting on one phrase over and over again as often as he was questioned.

Ah Fing took down his hat from the wall and a bottle from under the bar. He glanced at Thorpe several times in a sort of speculative way, hesitated on the point of going out, then edged up to the doctor and said with a mingled air of confidence and cunning:

"You velly good doctor, maybe? You make muchee people well?"

"Oh, muchee, muchee!" Thorpe agreed. This was no time to be modest about his fame.

"Then you come along all samee me. Plenty gold. Cash down."

"Friend of yours ill?" Thorpe asked.

"Friend wife—him velly sick. I go quick like the velly devil."

What blessed chance was this!

Thorpe had not been at all enthusiastic to explore that unknown warren by himself at midnight without a reasonable excuse. Now he was being invited to go, and Ah Fing was his escort. He hoped Mrs. Ah Fing was not very ill, and that he might get an opportunity to turn the conversation again to the subject of Peter the Less. He was almost certain now that Mrs. Ah Fing was the little doll-faced woman at whose door he had knocked the afternoon he set out to find Belle Crosby.

It was a relief to get out into the night, for all the evil odors in Christendom could not rival the atmosphere of that heathen hole. Limehouse smelled quite sweet by comparison.

Ah Fing explained anxiously that it was not his wife's habit to fall ill and send for him. She was "all the samee one healthy woman."

"Aei-yi!" he cried in anguish at the very thought of her being dangerously ill.

There was no doubt now in what ~~esteem~~ esteem he held her, and he was pinning his faith to the English doctor rather than to incantations and joss-sticks. Not that he would neglect to burn incense and prostrate himself before the altar of his god, but the English doctor who had come to hand so providentially was first in his calculations. To Ah Fing it was as a sign from Heaven.

The way led, as Thorpe remembered it, up the stairs and through the tortuous passages. Before Ah Fing could get out his key the door opened, and there stood the pretty little Chinawoman apparently in the pink of health, but rather solemn-faced.

Behind her was a magnificent interior—wall-hangings of faded rose silk, bordered with a rainbow fringe and a glittering line of bits of looking-glass cut into various shapes and set in gold: tall screens and some pieces of red and gold lacquer furniture. In the window, which was closely curtained, hung a big cage of goldfinches; on the floor were splendid Eastern rugs.

Mrs. Ah Fing looked askance at the doctor. She did not recognize him, which was not surprising; and if he guessed correctly his presence was *de trop* from her point of view.

Ah Fing did not carry his concern to the point of embracing her before a third person. He spoke in English out of deference to Thorpe, or in such English as he possessed, and explained rapidly that he had brought with him a remarkable medical man who would cure her malady at once.

The Chinese lady scowled, shook her head, and stood aside for them to enter.

There was nothing the matter with Mrs. Ah Fing so far as her physical well-being was concerned. Thorpe saw at a glance that she had not even contracted the opium habit. She pretended to be ill, however. They entered the gorgeous room, and Mrs. Ah Fing squatted on a silk-covered divan and pressed a hand first to one part of her anatomy and then to another. The pain chased itself from her head to her big toe, and in his anxiety to comprehend and follow it old Ah Fing nearly lost his mind.

He implored Thorpe to do something for her immediately, but the doctor could scarcely get a word in edgeways. The idea that the Chinese are a silent folk is rank fallacy. The Latin races aren't in it with them when they really get going.

Mrs. Ah Fing's symptoms were so many that her husband simply could not describe them to the doctor. He was credulous and doting and believed every word she said—and she said a great deal.

Thorpe thought of one remedy—the one they had at hand. He had seen the old man slip the bottle into his blouse.

"Now if only we had a little brandy," said the doctor, "we could save her life."

He forgot his pidgin English for the moment, but Ah Fing understood perfectly.

He produced his bottle, and the ailing woman was dosed with a tablespoonful of its contents. The cure was instantaneous. She sighed in the ecstasy of relief and became blissfully calm. Her husband breathed again.

The motive for this became plain in another instant. It was to get rid of the doctor.

"Now you can go. Ah Fing he givee you money and you go. Thank you velly much, sir. Me velly much obliged."

If she had something secret to communicate to her husband apparently she did not care to do it in her own language. Perhaps she thought the doctor understood Chinese. His clothes did not look sufficiently strange to make him a stranger.

Thorpe wanted to stay just where he was. Some chance word might give him a clue to the woman of his own world whom he was seeking. Utterly improbable as it was, he knew that it was not impossible.

Again the question rose in his mind: How far could he trust Ah Fing; how far could he throw his problem on the mercy of this man whose ways were not the ways of white men, whose very livelihood was gained at the price of white men's souls?

Thorpe had always imagined that he knew quite a lot about these people; but he remembered now that never had he come among them without feeling how little he could ever really learn.

He wasn't in the least afraid of having his throat cut. It was simply the fear of utter futility. If they thought he had some definite object in mind in questioning them, he would never get a straight answer. They would assume at once that to inform him would do them no good and perhaps harm. They would be suave and pleasant but blandly and completely negative.

Ah Fing was reaching down into his pocket for the gold he had promised. He produced a sovereign and politely tested it with his teeth before offering it to Thorpe.

"No can takee money, Ah Fing. Great pleasure. No can takee," the doctor said decidedly.

Ah Fing was delighted.

"Me velly much obliged," he said with a profound bow.

An Occidental ceremony was now implied. He must offer his friend, the English doctor, a drink.

Mrs. Ah Fing was bidden to bring glasses. This she did with great reluctance, but her lord was accustomed to obedience, and now that she was so completely recovered from her recent indisposition he would have been very angry had she refused.

She pattered about energetically, brought a little lacquered table and a silver tray and fetched some exquisite old cut-glass tumblers from a cupboard, together with a carafe of water.

It was while she was doing this that Rodney Thorpe became aware of a fourth presence in the room. Some one was surely concealed behind the black-and-gold dragon-patterned screen.

Ah Fing had his back to the screen and so did not notice the several glances his little wife cast in its direction. Once under pretense of hunting for something she peered behind it, and Thorpe, in amiable discourse with her spouse, saw her lift a finger to her lips.

Very likely it was no concern of his, but his curiosity was fired, nevertheless.

There flashed across his mind an image of the pleasant interior of Fairlawn. How remote it was from this strange place on the Limehouse Beach—all the distance between west and east, between England and China.

Yet they were linked by the elements of mystery which will always link the west and the east, to the peril of both, perhaps. The fantastic and dreadful had crept into Fairlawn, and one of its signs was the lacquer box which Lilian Ashe had given the doctor to destroy. As for old Ah Fing, he supplied opium to the elect of Limehouse, and Limehouse returned the compliment with its gift of strong drink.

The Chinaman poured out a generous libation for himself, but accorded his guest the privilege of taking what suited him. Thorpe could not well refuse, but a muddled head was the last thing he wanted. Accordingly he mixed his drink, tasted it, and then strolled casually in the direction of the screen.

"That's a very wonderful work of art you have there, Ah Fing," he said.

The little Chinawoman clapped a hand over her mouth in fright. Ah Fing's head swiveled slowly on his heavy neck.

He was even more surprised than Thorpe when a woman—an Englishwoman—staggered out from behind the screen and launched herself at the doctor with a hysterical cry of relief.

"I thought it was your voice, but I couldn't believe it possible!" she gasped.

The woman was Lilian Ashe.

CHAPTER XVI.

THE WOMAN BEHIND THE SCREEN.

SOME one chose this critical moment to knock at the door.

In the hush that followed the proverbial pin might have dropped and wakened an echo. Secretive, mysterious people, these—and none more so than Lilian Ashe, in Thorpe's opinion.

They were used to emergencies apparently; they thought with the rapidity of chain lightning.

Fifteen seconds after the knock, which was not repeated, Mrs. Ah Fing opened the door. During those fifteen seconds a rapid and silent redistribution of the scene had been effected.

Lilian stepped back again into her hiding-place behind the screen. Mrs. Ah Fing swept a clear space on the lacquer table, and her husband produced a pack of playing-cards. He motioned Thorpe to the divan and scattered the cards artistically. To all intents and purposes an absorbing game of fan-tan was in progress.

Thorpe, sitting back to the door, pulled his cap low over his eyes and kept his ears open. Outwardly he seemed cool enough, but inwardly he was seething with excitement.

Ah Fing, expressionless as a Buddha, looked up with languid interest as he began what was presumably a fresh deal.

Thorpe recognized the rather hoarse uneducated voice at the door, and he hoped to heaven she would not recognize him. He pretended great interest in the cards.

It was the girl, Belle Crosby, who had knocked.

"Sorry to trouble you, Mrs. Ah Fing," she said stridently, "but I'm lookin' for my 'usband. Can't get into my room. 'E's gone orf an' locked the door, the silly beggar."

"Me velly solly, too. Much obliged. Him husband not here. Come home soon, maybe," replied the little Chinawoman with her bobbing bow.

"Which husband you mean?" growled Ah Fing.

"You think you're no end clever, you do!" the girl shrilled. Her voice fairly shook with anger.

The Chinaman laughed.

"Black Peter, he come by me allee samee to-night. I give him go-by, pleasant journey. Not come again, I bet."

To Thorpe's consternation, the girl strode into the room, brushing Mrs. Ah Fing aside as an inconsequential fly. But she had no eyes for him at all. She flew at the Chinaman like a termagant.

"Why did Peter come by you? Who comes along with him? English moll, perhaps? Eh? You tell me?"

A flash of understanding illuminated the Oriental's face for a brief instant. It was gone before Thorpe was even sure it existed.

"You makee only English moll for Black Peter, missee. All alone; now you tie up along Sam Goldburg. Too bad. Maybe Police Johnny catch him. Maybe hang him. Damn good thing, too."

Ah Fing swooped up the cards with relish and looked as sympathetic as his words would permit.

"I don't know nothing about Peter," the girl said sullenly. "What's he to me?"

She flung out of the room, and Mrs. Ah Fing turned the key in the lock and shot a bolt across the door.

Again there was absolute silence for a few seconds.

Then Ah Fing got up, padded softly to the door, undid the fastenings—which had been oiled to perfect noiselessness—and opened the door quickly.

He surprised no one. The corridor was empty. Then he reversed the operation and smiled complacently.

"She's gone—and Black Peter he comes by the river, maybe, and locks her out."

Lilian reappeared from her hiding-place. She was very white and her face robbed of its beauty by a certain set hardness it had acquired.

Thorpe looked at her closely. She was not under the influence of opium or of anything, as far as he could see, except her own tense emotion.

She held out her hand and there was a key in it.

"It was I who locked her out," she said.

The little Chinawoman nodded sagely, took the key from Lilian, and, going to the window, parted the heavy curtains, thrust her hand through, and there was a light splash from below. So these rooms also overhung the river.

Thorpe understood Mrs. Ah Fing's motive. That key represented some sort of evidence and it was wise to dispose of it promptly.

He turned to Lilian.

"I came down here to find you, but I don't think I expected—"

"To find me here," she finished. Then added dryly, "In that case why did you come?"

She shrugged her shoulders with a tired movement and gave her attention to Mrs. Ah Fing, who was explaining something to her husband faster even than most women can talk. It sounded like the melodious gurgle of a turkey-gobbler.

The Chinaman nodded and grunted, shifting his gaze from one to another of the little group. He seemed singularly unperturbed. Finally in the midst of it, her talk following all the time, he went to the window and, ducking under the bullfinches' cage, thrust aside the curtains revealing the Thames by night, a beautiful miracle of moonlit water dotted here and there with the red-and-white lanterns of sailing-craft.

There was something too utterly fantastic about it all for Rodney Thorpe's common sense to grasp. Why were he and Lilian Ashe here—he in his navvy's disguise and she in the shabby black of a stage heroine? What had this transplanted bit of the Orient to do with them?

The full-flavored atmosphere of the East oppressed him horribly. He was willing to grant Lilian the privilege of keeping her own secrets, but when—for the sake of her family's peace of mind—he was dragged into them, he felt that he had every right to demand explanations.

Ah Fing leaned far out of the window,

grunting with the effort, for his build was not athletic. He detached something from a crevice in the outer wall. It appeared to be a long pole or boat-hook. Then he leaned out still further, to his peril, and began to pull and haul at an object in the water. Every movement was stealthy and practically soundless.

Thorpe was about to speak, but Mrs. Ah Fing, with her finger to her lips, cautioned silence. Her slant eyes glittered like an interested child's.

At a backward gesture from her husband she went to a cupboard and fetched a long coil of tarred rope, which proved to be the companion of the flexible ladder Thorpe had noted in Belle Crosby's room. The denizens of this rookery evidently had their bright ideas in common.

Mrs. Ah Fing hooked one end on to the framework of the sill, and her husband helped her to pay it out with his free hand. When this was done, he beckoned to Thorpe and whispered.

" You go quick, like the velly devil—you and lady friend. He come back, Black Peter — they makee much powwow. No time talkee. God bless you all. Me velly much obliged."

The old Chinaman's face was distinctly friendly, but anxious.

He wanted them to be off for their own sakes, very likely, and there must have been some good reason for his choosing this method for their departure.

Thorpe climbed out over the sill and felt his way down carefully. Below him the water dimpled like a heaving carpet of tarnished silver. A little boat rode between two anchorages—one the boat-hook which Ah Fing manipulated, and the other a rope which fastened it to some one else's window-sill. Its stern barely reached the dangling ladder, and Thorpe had to be careful of his footing. He crawled to the bow and unfastened the rope, and the Chinaman drew it into a better position.

Obviously it was the dingey belonging to Peter the Less. If that individual should happen suddenly to doubt its security anything might happen. But Ah Fing was right. A grand powwow was in progress in the room which must have been Belle Crosby's. It was not loud, but absorbing, and the blinds were closely drawn over the windows.

Lilian was now being helped over the sill and Thorpe was pleased to observe that she displayed no hesitation. She came down as lightly as a cat and without a word settled herself at the tiller.

Ah Fing gave the dingey a shove with his boat-hook and waved a silent farewell. His little wife, silhouetted against the gold-and-rose brightness of the room, poked a curious head into the framed picture to watch them.

Then the heavy curtains were drawn and the window was blotted out.

Thorpe pulled hard at the oars, which were strong but light. The river, with its twists and turnings and unforeseen pools and basins at this point, was a mystery to him. His only idea was to put distance between them and something unpleasant which might follow if it got a chance to do so.

And then the thought came to him that the man whose boat they had stolen was trapped. He would be obliged to stay in that room or risk capture. Evidently the obvious route of the river had not occurred to the police, but in spite of its semideserted air, there might be a man or two in the street who knew Peter the Less, and would be rewarded suitably for reporting him.

" Do you know where we are—or where we are going?" Thorpe asked, after the sharp edge of anxiety had worn off a little.

" I think I know. We might try for Cleopatra's Needle, if it won't tire you too much. It's a long way, but—"

" If you can steer, I can pull," Thorpe said grimly.

He was furiously angry with her. He felt that she had jeopardized his own happiness as the sister of Anne. In the past few days Anne's whole attitude had changed toward him. Anne, in fact, was not Anne, as he had known her previously.

For a long time his emotions were expressed in the vicious energy he gave to his work at the oars. A curious outing, this!

What time was it?

The answer came almost immediately in

a single silver chime, taken up one after another by all the church-bells of London.

Yet it was no answer at all, really. It might have been one or half past, or the half of any hour after midnight. Thorpe felt as though his innocent curiosity had been mocked.

At length they cleared the devious byways. Ahead, when he turned to look, was a threaded chain of lights spanning the river. It must be—it should be—London Bridge.

"I suppose I ought to explain to you," said a thin voice from the stern of the dingey. Her face was merely a white blur to him.

He rested for an instant on the oars, and as the tide was running out they were carried back a couple of yards.

"If you don't explain—by God, I'll know why!" he replied.

His task of carrying them steadily upstream in defiance of the tide, which in unsuspected places swirled seaward with the strength of a mountain torrent, was back-breaking. Every few minutes the frail dingey swung about, and once it achieved two complete revolutions. As far as Thorpe was concerned, there was scant opportunity for conversation. It even strained his strength to listen.

Yet he heard her.

It was as fantastic as all they had left behind; as fantastic as the position in which they both were at this moment. "I had a letter this morning," she began.

Thorpe, tugging at the oars, muttered an indistinct assent. He had heard about that letter.

"It was from the man—the burglar—the man they think shot my husband. But I told you it was I—I who took the revolver from the drawer—"

"Yes, I know all that," said Thorpe.

"He said he must see me; that his life and liberty were at stake. The police know who he is. He appealed to me. What could I do?"

"What—*did* you do?" Thorpe articulated jerkily between strokes.

"I was frightened. I went to see him. I thought something could be arranged; that perhaps he would take money and leave the country. But he locked me in a room. He said he was going to keep me as hostage for his own safety. Can you imagine anything more despicable?"

What Thorpe imagined, he kept to himself. It sounded a fine tale, but he did not believe a word of it.

"And then?" he queried.

"I was there for five or six hours. I can't describe how I felt. I was all alone. He said he would come back at midnight and see if I was willing to sign some sort of paper exonerating him. And then I found a key that unlocked the door. I was crazy, mad, with fear. The key was on the shelf over the fireplace. I had been looking everywhere for some way of escape. And there all the time was the key. It fitted the lock!"

She paused. In recollection it was a terrific moment for her.

"Very well; it fitted the lock," Thorpe prompted, without enthusiasm.

"Yes, I was free! But not free either. I didn't know where to go or who might stop me. And then; then the Chinawoman opened her door. Some one was coming up the stairs, and it might have been *he*. The Chinawoman was very kind; she took me in and said she would send for her husband, who hated that man, Black Peter, as she called him. She said her husband would get me away. She sent a message by some one saying she was ill. And then you came, too, doctor. How on earth did you know where to find me?"

"It wasn't difficult to guess, after all that's happened," Thorpe replied angrily. "Ah Fing is an old friend of mine. From what you yourself have told me—and Miss Gieve—I assumed that you had gone there to get opium, and perhaps were not in a condition to look after yourself."

She did not reply.

"And this is all of your story?"

"What more could there be? Isn't it enough? I'm being blackmailed. Don't you understand?" She spoke sharply.

"I understand that you're lying," he retorted.

"Oh, how can you speak to me like this, when you must realize what a terrible experience I've been through! You are cruel and unfeeling."

"What about the telegram? Who sent that?" he asked, ignoring her accusation.

"Telegram? What telegram?"

CHAPTER XVII.

AFLOAT.

"SOME one sent a telegram to Anne signed 'Lilian,'" Thorpe explained wearily. "It said you would not be home to-night—to-morrow, perhaps. That was all. It was sent from Aldgate."

"Well, of course *he* sent it," Lilian said after a moment's reflection.

"Kindly stop referring to the fellow as 'he.' You know his name as well as I do," the doctor cried impatiently.

"His name is Peter Estey. That was the name he signed to the letter."

"Evidently you know the man—"

"I know him now."

"He seems to be well enough acquainted with you."

"You mean because he sent a telegram to Anne signed with my Christian name? Really, doctor, you are rather absurd. I dare say he reads the newspapers. It would be no difficult task to discover from them all about our names and relationships."

"Then what did Miss Gieve mean by saying you confessed to her about the opium? According to her, you got it from some one in the East End."

"So I could get it if I chose. But not exactly in the East End," she retorted with spirit. "I could get it from a chemist I know in the city."

"You didn't tell me that," Thorpe said in exasperation.

"No, I didn't want you to think I'd ever done such a stupid thing."

"I don't believe you have, but you're doing a very stupid thing now—telling half lies. This man, Peter Estey, Black Peter, or whatever you choose to call him, is known to you. I've looked up his record myself. I can't imagine how a woman like you ever happened to run across him, but you must have done so, some time, somewhere."

Lilian sighed.

"I can't discuss it with you; I'm too utterly worn out. I never saw him before that night."

"And you gave the police a very good description of what he was not in the least like," Thorpe broke in.

He, too, was utterly worn out.

Suddenly she pulled sharply at the tiller-rope and the dingey dived into the shadows of a coal-barge they were passing.

"Look out; what are you doing?" Thorpe cried.

"Hush!" she cautioned. "There's a police-cutter. They might ask awkward questions."

A slim launch suggestive of a greyhound in its lines and speed appeared a few yards away.

"The river-patrol—I nearly forgot to keep an eye out for them," Lilian whispered. "We'll lie up here for a few moments."

The cutter rippled past them, away into the moonlight.

"You know all the hazards," Thorpe said grimly.

"You needn't sneer at me. Of course I do. My father was a master-mariner. He had a ship of his own and sailed her from Tilbury to the Canaries, and to Spain and Portugal. We—my mother and Anne and I—always went with him. Anne was only a baby, but I was a grown girl. Very likely you doubt that."

Thorpe said nothing. It seemed less open to doubt than other things she had told him, but it increased rather than diminished the sense of mystery that surrounded her.

Dawn was breaking when finally the dingey ran awash of the granite steps at the foot of the Needle. They climbed out, ankle-deep in water, and set the boat adrift.

There was no one to see them land except a homeless wanderer curled up on a seat on the embankment, and he was asleep.

The life of the town was stirring, however. They made for Waterloo Bridge and met a stream of market-carts. On the Surrey side a washing down of streets was in progress.

It was nearly six o'clock when Lilian found herself at the gates of Fairlawn. Her gardener, who was trimming the hedge, stared in astonishment.

"What will you tell Anne?" the doctor asked before he parted from her.

Evidently Lilian had long ago made up her mind what to tell Anne.

"That I went to a hotel because I finished my business so late, but took the first train back this morning to save them from worrying," she replied rapidly.

Again it was afternoon, and Anne was devoting herself to Rosemary, who had developed into a croquet fiend and liked playing with her Aunt Anne because the latter was not too expert.

To-day Anne was beaten many times. Her heart was not in the game. but she felt that she might as well play croquet as do anything else, and it amused Rosemary.

In Anne's opinion her sister's story was untrue.

Lilian had told it and gone straight to her room. She had had a bath, nestling afterward into the comfort of fresh linen and a woolen wrapper; her breakfast was sent up to her, and the rest of the day she was apparently spending in sleep.

But Lilian was not her sister's only worry. In fact, she was not Anne's greatest worry. It was Miss Gieve and not—as might be imagined—in connection with Rodney Thorpe. As far as he was concerned, Anne felt that her heart was broken beyond repair; but she did not hold Miss Gieve wholly responsible for that.

However, Miss Gieve was responsible for Rosemary, and there was no doubt about it, the governess had set herself deliberately to give the child a very bad time.

Yesterday there was the incident of the high stool punishment. To-day, with Lilian in the house, Rosemary had been given a double dose of piano practise and cracked over the knuckles with a pencil because she didn't hold her fingers properly. Anne discovered this because the child had tied a handkerchief around the wounded hand—perhaps to draw attention to it—and when questioned by her aunt, proudly displayed her reddened knuckles. On one of them the skin had broken a little.

"You must tell your mother," Anne commanded vehemently. She herself had made a vow not to complain of Miss Gieve.

"It doesn't hurt," said Rosemary. "It isn't half so bad as when she twists my arm or pulls my hair when she's brushing it."

"Good Heavens! Do you mean to say she dares do such things to you? How long has it been going on?"

"Only since daddy died," the child replied with a sigh.

"Why does she do it?" Anne persisted in an agony of compassion.

"'Cause she's afraid of me, I guess," Rosemary said airily. "Come along, Aunt Anne, get on—it's your shot."

But Anne would not "get on." She laid down her mallet to Rosemary's dismay.

"You must tell me what you mean. I don't know why Miss Gieve should be afraid of you, but people aren't usually deliberately unkind to those they fear."

"I guess she thinks it 'll make me afraid of her," said the child.

"And—are you?"

"N-no," she said a little doubtfully. "I don't want mummy worried. That's all. You mustn't tell her, Aunt Anne. Promise you won't tell mummy."

"Oh dear, I don't know what to do!" Anne cried.

"You can tell Dr. Thorpe if you like," Rosemary said.

Now this was exactly what Anne could not do, but it was impossible to explain to her small niece.

"Why don't you scream or run away from her, or cry out, or something," Anne suggested. "I *won't* have you ill-treated. But *I* can't dismiss her—"

"You're not to tell mummy!" the child repeated insistently. "And if you feel so badly about it, Aunt Anne, I'll not say again what she does."

This was a threat that Anne could not bear. Better to know the worst, although the hours Rosemary and Miss Gieve spent together would now be hours of torture for the tender-hearted young aunt.

"And I'll never tell you *anything* any more unless you go on with our game," Rosemary said, following up what she saw was a triumph.

So the game went on, although Anne's heart was not in it.

Meanwhile, Lilian was performing a leisurely toilet calculated to be complete about half an hour before tea-time. She had had a long rest and looked well. She was of a type to whom widow's weeds are becoming, their very heaviness accentuating her fragile gold-and-white beauty.

When she was nearly dressed she rang for Susan and told the girl to ask Miss Gieve to come to her sitting-room.

The governess was waiting for her when she went in.

" Sit down, please," Lilian said. She herself chose a comfortable chair with an air of lassitude, as though the fatigue of the adventurous night was still in her bones.

Miss Gieve, demure and respectful, said " Thank you " and did as bidden.

" I'm sorry you told Dr. Thorpe what I—what I had told you," Lilian began, not exactly in a tone of reproof, but reproachfully.

Miss Gieve clasped her hands together and looked contrite.

" Oh, Mrs. Ashe, I wouldn't have told him, except that he said something, from which I was sure he knew."

" It doesn't matter very much—I told him myself, you see. Only, I don't want my sister to know. It would distress her too much if she thought I was addicted to drugs."

" Indeed, I'd cut my tongue out rather than tell her," the governess protested.

Lilian's glance lowered to the beautiful hands clasped in her lap.

" There are so many things I can't very well explain to you—I mean that aren't at all necessary to explain. Last night, for instance. It seems that Dr. Thorpe knew where to—to look for me."

" Did he?" exclaimed Miss Gieve in innocent surprise.

The older woman's face expressed relief. What had she feared? It was quite plain from the hovering anxiety in her eyes that she feared a great deal from this demure, respectful young person in her employ.

" That's—that's really all, Miss Gieve. I merely wanted to make sure that you would not extend your confidences about me to my sister."

" Oh, Mrs. Ashe! How could you think I would?"

" Well, now I'm sure you won't. And while I am glad you are going to stay for another month, there's nothing to worry about, really. I sha'n't give either you or Dr. Thorpe any more anxiety. Curiously enough I find I haven't the least desire for the drug. It was—just a thing for the moment, to help me over a bad time. If you feel that you don't care to stay here—"

The governess got up. Her demureness seemed to vanish, although she was, if possible, a trifle more respectful than usual.

" Indeed, Mrs. Ashe, I put your needs before my own wishes. Dr. Thorpe wants me to stay on. He thinks you might need me; that I would be useful in case of a relapse. I shall stay on, and it will be no hardship at all."

" Thank you," Lilian faltered. " It is very kind of you to put it like that."

" Not at all. I am sure it is what Mr. Ashe would have wished, too. And you can trust to my discretion, absolutely."

With that she made a graceful exit, leaving Lilian crushed to the dust, apparently, for scarcely was she out of the room before the young widow collapsed into a fit of silent but violent weeping.

At tea the family gathered under the big oak at the end of the croquet lawn. Lilian had carefully obliterated the traces of her tears; but the tired, set look was on her face, much the same expression that had marred it when she stepped out from behind the screen in the little Chinawoman's gorgeous home.

They were rather an ill-constrained party until reenforced by guests. A motor drove up containing old Mrs. Ashe and Mrs. William Ashe, the latter a pretty and good-natured, if somewhat colorless, woman ruled entirely by her mother-in-law.

Lilian received the old woman's greetings with trepidation.

" That sister of yours worked us up into a state of anxiety, I can tell you," old Mrs. Ashe began in her usual disagreeable manner, ignoring Anne, which was a part of the manner. " Telephoning all over the place to know where you were. Where were you?"

Lilian pretended not to hear the final question.

"It was too bad of Anne. I sent her a telegram explaining that I'd be a little late, but she hadn't got it when she telephoned. Sit here, Beatrice. I'm so glad to see you." Beatrice was Mrs. William Ashe. "Miss Gieve, will you ask Simmons to bring some fresh tea and toast?"

Mrs. Ashe's lorgnette went up to follow the slim figure of the governess as it sped across the lawn.

"Oh, that *nice* Miss Gieve! Do you make her do errands like a servant, Lilian?"

"Why, indeed, mother, I didn't think. Of course Miss Gieve runs errands, but I'm sure she doesn't object."

"H-m!" the lorgnette twisted around to Anne and then passed on to Rosemary, who stared back at it without winking.

"Come, sit on grandma's lap, poor lamb! And where were you so late last night, Lilian? I should have thought if you were in town, courtesy—*mere courtesy*—would have prompted you to call on me."

"The "poor lamb," whose legs certainly entitled her to the name, got up and did a little skipping in an opposite direction from the one her grandmother had indicated.

"If you've done your tea, Aunt Anne, come and finish our game," she shrilled.

"That child has shocking manners. I'm sure she doesn't get them from Miss Gieve," old Mrs. Ashe commented with a stare at Anne, who had risen to follow Rosemary.

A trembling tide of anger overwhelmed Anne. Here was another admirer of Miss Gieve. It was insupportable.

Rodney Thorpe was crossing the lawn. To the girl who loved him he had chosen this moment to seem peculiarly irresistible. His tennis flannels reminded her of last summer when they had been very happy in the first days of friendship. She dated her love for him from that time.

CHAPTER XVIII.

THE STRANGE VISITOR.

TO the casual observer it was just an informal family tea-party, only the somber dresses of the women hinting at the recent tragedy. Anne nodded to the doctor, but could not bring herself to smile.

"If you'll excuse me, Lilian, I'll finish the game with Rosemary," she said. The sight of Thorpe stiffened her self-control. It was lucky he had come when he did, otherwise she most certainly would have been rude to old Mrs. Ashe.

All day Rodney Thorpe had been dreading the necessity of paying a visit to Fairlawn and he was glad now to find other visitors besides himself.

Lilian greeted him as though nothing had happened, as though that dark adventure of theirs had been a dream. He was obliged to join the group around the tea-table, although he did not want any tea, and longed to be with Anne. Anne had retreated, in a figurative sense, far away from him in the past few days. He felt that he must call her back.

Instead, it was Miss Gieve who came back without any calling and settled herself in the cane chair beside him. She leaned toward him confidentially.

"I expect you're very tired to-day."

"A little," he admitted.

Her glance rested for an instant on his face, as soft as a caress.

"Now what are you two whispering about?" old Mrs. Ashe demanded playfully. Her voice carried across the lawn, where Anne, who was not insensible to the proximity of the two chairs, heard it.

"You can't play for nuts this afternoon, Aunt Anne," Rosemary cried, swelling in triumph over the success of her own shots.

Anne's confusion at thus being publicly betrayed passed unnoticed under a lecture of protest Rosmary's grandmother delivered on the expression the child had used.

"In my day, little girls were severely punished for using slang. Miss Gieve, I'm afraid you are too gentle with Rosemary. She's a spoiled child."

Miss Gieve sighed and said she did her best.

Mrs. William Ashe got up and joined the croquet players, asking if she might take a hand, and the old lady nudged Lilian.

"I want to speak to you privately and I'm sure these two young people won't mind being left alone."

Miss Gieve got up quickly.

"Oh, no—don't let us disturb you. Come

along, doctor, we'll take a little stroll. I want to show you the wonderful bed of pansies that Rosemary and I raised from seed."

Thorpe had seen the wonderful pansy-bed many times before. Rosemary herself displayed it to him at every available opportunity, but he was obliged to acquiesce in Miss Gieve'e tactful withdrawal and recognized the usefulness of her excuse.

They strolled slowly across the lawn. Miss Gieve walked with a sauntering motion, swaying her body with a sense of rhythm, the peculiar unconscious bearing of a woman in love. When they reached the path she touched his arm lightly.

"Never mind the pansies. Come into the house. I want to talk to you."

To his great relief she did not ask any questions about last night.

She stepped briskly ahead into the cool, dim drawing-room, screened from the sun with striped awnings, and sweet with flowers.

"Mrs. Ashe is very fond of heavy scents," she said. "She doesn't use them much on her person, but she likes them in the rooms. I've been thinking over our little talk early last evening—you remember, when I sneaked in to see you? It seems a long time ago."

Thorpe nodded.

"Yes, and you've decided to stay here. I'm glad of that."

Miss Gieve laughed unsteadily.

"You're the only one who is glad, then. Miss Morris hates me, and even Mrs. Ashe—although she was very kind—intimated this afternoon that I might go as soon as I pleased. I remembered what you said and pretended not to understand."

The governess was the only link Thorpe had with the household now, on a frank basis—at least so he imagined. Anne was being sheltered from the truth, and Lilian was bent on concealing it from everybody.

"If it were not for you, I wouldn't stay a minute!" Miss Gieve cried, looking as though she might burst into tears.

"My dear child, it can't be as bad as all that. Surely you've been very happy—"

"Oh, I was happy enough when Mr. Ashe was alive. But never mind that. I want to ask you something. Do you believe in dual personalities, doctor?"

"What do you mean—*Jekyll* and *Hyde* business?"

"Well—yes, I suppose that is what I mean."

"There have been many so-called cases, but the medical profession recognizes it only as a disturbance of the brain. Every lunatic is afflicted with the delusion."

"Oh, I don't mean mad people. Mrs. Ashe isn't mad, is she?"

Thorpe did not reply. The girl undoubtedly had some information up her sleeve.

"I believe that Mrs. Ashe is really two people," Miss Gieve went on earnestly. "The one we know best is gentle, sweet, and good. We know her best that way, don't we, doctor?"

"Yes, I suppose so," Thorpe agreed.

"And the other—don't think I'm silly—but the other woman or personality is just the reverse. The other woman might even commit murder."

Thorpe went cold all over. Was Miss Gieve merely surmising?

"Not deliberately," he said with some sharpness.

"I do mean deliberately."

"Nonsense! Forgive me, but you are being silly."

"Then you think the Mrs. Ashe we know is capable of taking drugs; of employing one of the lowest forms of drug-taking—"

"Any person is capable of taking drugs, and any form of it is low. Mrs. Ashe is not a victim of the opium habit. You can't acquire any habit—drink, tobacco, or drugs—by a few single indulgences. It takes years to make a drunkard even. That doesn't lessen the danger, however. It's a question of nerves and the gradual weakening of the moral fiber."

Miss Gieve's opinions were beginning to bore Thorpe. He did not care to take her entirely into his confidence and, far from impressing him, they inclined him to believe that Lilian's story might be true in whole as well as in part.

Only—he did not like that ugly word murder which the girl had used.

Thorpe had had a confession from Lilian that she had accidentally shot her husband while meaning to defend him and herself. No one else knew that except the burglar, whom she claimed was blackmailing her because of it.

Why should Miss Gieve state that she believed the "other personality" of Lilian to be capable of murder?

They had discussed Lilian far too much in the doctor's opinion.

He got up.

"Let's go out with the others," he suggested.

She followed him a little reluctantly in her slow sauntering fashion. As her skirts brushed him at the door he became uncomfortably aware of her. He noticed the gloss of her black hair and the creamy warmth of her complexion; the slim, flexible build of her body and the way she carried her head—all in one instant of comprehension.

Then instantly he was ashamed; so much so that a flush mounted his temples. With a quick revulsion of feeling he knew that he hated her.

There was something guilty in his bearing and in the telltale flush as he accompanied her. Anne, who was just coming in, saw it and would have passed them with a little nod, but he stopped her. Miss Gieve halted, waiting for him with a proprietary air.

"Anne, I want to see you a moment alone," he said bruskly, conscious of his rudeness to Miss Gieve, but apparently not caring. "I've something to say to you. I've done you a great injustice."

Miss Gieve walked on slowly out of hearing, but kept her air of waiting for him.

It was in his mind to tell Anne that he believed she had been right about Miss Gieve, and to apologize for his fatuous stupidity, but when he said "I've done you a great injustice," it was quite natural that Anne should misunderstand. She supposed that he was going to tell her it was all a mistake and that he did not love her after all.

It was her pride which widened the breach.

"Don't be absurd," she said with a forced smile. "I am not suffering under a sense of injustice. And you must excuse me. I've got something rather important to do."

The something important was to go up to her own room, lock herself in and have a good cry.

The other visitors had left when Thorpe said good-by to Lilian. He had no chance for a word with her alone either, for both Miss Gieve and Rosemary were there.

The injustice was on the other foot now. He was smarting with it. Anne was pursuing her policy of being cold and distant; he had come suddenly to mistrust Miss Gieve's motives; and Lilian took far too much for granted.

It was only for Anne's sake that he had mixed himself up in their affairs, and Anne had retired to such a chilly altitude that he could not reach her. It was altogether hard on a chap who meant well and who, incidentally, loved Anne.

Thorpe permitted himself to grow sulky.

His office hours were from six to eight, and that evening as no one called he set himself to compose a reproachful letter to Anne. He was no letter-writer, however, and it seemed foolish to write to a girl who lived only a few doors away. No, he would wait for her to give him a sign that she was still interested in his existence. The letters—there were several of them begun—were destroyed in turn. She knew he cared for her. Why write about it?

Now the rain was coming down. It began with a dull patter, livened by a flash or two of lightning; then the wind took a hand and lashed it furiously against the windows and set the trees to groaning.

Thorpe hoped that some one at Fairlawn would ring him up and express a desire for his society. He would willingly have come out of his sulks for a glimpse of Anne and braved the elements, but he was sufficiently stubborn to wait for an invitation.

He wondered what was going on in the house over there. He thought of Miss Gieve and the moment of self-revelation when she had brushed against him and he had been so painfully conscious of her as a woman. To be conscious of a woman one does not love—the flush mounted his temples once again.

Then suddenly he recalled a half-rueful remark poor Harry Ashe had once made to him apropos of Miss Gieve: "You always know when she's about, for all she's so quiet. You're *aware* of her, as it were."

That was the word, *aware*. Thorpe pondered it over his pipe and wondered if Harry Ashe had spoken with a fuller meaning than his remark implied.

The doctor was rather glad, on the whole, that he himself had become aware of Miss Gieve. It put him on his guard. What was she up to? He saw now a certain significance in her green-and-silver splendor last night, when apparently she had only come to have a serious chat with him about the care Lilian might require from both of them. It was a significance of sex that had nothing to do with Lilian or the obscure problem at Fairlawn.

Meanwhile, outside the wind howled and the rain dashed madly.

He thought he heard the door-bell ring and started up to listen. Would his housekeeper hear? Perhaps she was in bed. No, she was thumping along the passage to answer it.

In another instant she flew into the study, a mixture of fright and perplexity.

"The saints preserve us, doctor, there's a heathen Chinee at the door asking for you! I shut the door in his face, but I'm thinking he's coming around by the surgery. 'Tis banshees and devils be abroad on a night like this."

The woman crossed herself.

The heathen could not find the surgery-bell and pounded on the door with both fists.

"Don't be alarmed, Mrs. Donovan. I think it's an old friend of mine—neither banshee nor devil."

He went through to the surgery and let his visitor in. It was, as he thought from the woman's uncomplimentary description, old Ah Fing, very wet and dripping.

CHAPTER XIX.

THE WARNING.

"VELLY solly makee wrong door," apologized Ah Fing with a deeply reproachful glance at the doctor's housekeeper.

Mrs. Donovan was torn between fascination and fear, but in truth the old Chinaman was nothing much to look at and not in the least terrifying. He had been caught in the storm without an umbrella and water streamed from his garments like a mountain torrent, forming into a generous pool at his feet. He was painfully conscious of this and stood still, not daring to move lest the catastrophe spread.

"Velly solly, makee muchee wet. Lady velly cross, I bet."

"Don't you bother a bit," Thorpe said heartily. "It's only water. You must excuse Mrs. Donovan; she thinks you come for medicine, see? This door for medicine."

Ah Fing smiled forgivingly at the inhospitable female who had slammed the front door in his face, and that perturbed and very Christian person crossed herself again.

Thorpe ordered her off to make hot grog, and himself put a match to the logs in the grate. The Chinaman had begun to shiver. In common with his tribe he felt the cold acutely.

His presence, so unexpected, aroused the keenest interest in Thorpe and some little apprehension, but the doctor knew that certain formalities of polite custom must take place before Ah Fing would unburden himself as to the object of his visit.

These formalities proceeded duly.

"Well, chin-chin," said the doctor, after the housekeeper had served him with hot grog.

"Chin-chin—velly good. Makee warm like hell inside. Me velly much obliged." Ah Fing bowed ceremoniously.

Surely, thought Thorpe, from the look of him with his gray mustache, well-nourished air, and fine manners, in his own country he could have been no less than a mandarin—but perhaps a discredited mandarin—with a price on his head.

And then, without further preamble, the object of the visit was revealed. Ah Fing set down his glass and regarded Thorpe urbanely.

"Black Peter, he come all the samee alongside you to-night for to—"

The end of the sentence was finished in the sign language. The Chinaman drew a yellow forefinger across his own throat from ear to ear and made a gurgling sound.

"What the devil does he want to kill me for?" Thorpe demanded petulantly.

"He damn sick you come all the time alongside his place. He damn mad you steal him girl. He settle now, once, maybe, along with you—to-night. He givee you one rattling damn bad time. Finish, see? You steal him boat, too. Oh, Black Peter, him velly cross!"

The old man's eyes were alert to see what effect all this would have on the English doctor. Apparently Thorpe was not as frightened as he ought to be, but he was angry.

"I didn't steal his girl!"

"Oh, yes—very solly, sir. English lady, gold topknot, run away in boat all samee alongside you. Eh?"

It was Lilian the Chinaman meant, not Belle Crosby. Incidentally Thorpe might have pointed out that Ah Fing himself had stolen the boat and engineered the elopement. But the ways of the Celestial are devious and to follow them requires patience rather than boldness.

"How did he know I was there last night?" Thorpe asked presently.

"Fellow in laundry tell him." Ah Fing always referred to his illegal joint as the laundry. "Fellow alongside sailor mans. Little fellow—Joe, the rat—him die pretty soon maybe. Velly sick fellow."

Thorpe nodded. He remembered the consumptive boy who had heard him recall himself to Ah Fing.

"Joe all the samee pals alongside Black Peter. Belle Crosby — she see you all samee alongside my house. Velly big row. Boat gone. English moll gone. You gone. Key gone. I know nothing—nothing a-tall. I say, 'You, Black Peter, kick up one damn row; you hush him mouth or I call policeman Johnny.' He hush velly quick. That's all."

"What makes you think he's coming here?" Thorpe asked.

Ah Fing grinned evilly.

"I bet he come alongside you."

"You don't know. You only think, maybe—"

Ah Fing dived into a sodden pocket and produced a gold coin. He was willing to back his opinion to the extent of a sovereign, but nothing would induce him to explain more definitely why he held that opinion. Thorpe never discovered whether it was instinct or knowledge. He declined the wager, however.

"Now me go. Velly good grog. Me velly much obliged." Ah Fing bowed and threw a longing glance at what remained of the steaming brew.

Thorpe poured him a stirrup-cup and gave up the notion of detaining him for fuller information. He was very anxious to be off, now.

By this time the storm had lashed itself out and Ah Fing was warm enough to be comfortable, if not actually dry. Thorpe thanked him and let him out by way of the surgery. It was then nearly ten o'clock and the moon was up, on view intermittently between shoals of scudding gray clouds.

The Chinaman pattered off into the darkness, disappearing mysteriously, a shadow among shadows.

Thorpe left the surgery door open and the one leading into his study from it. The air needed clearing. Then he rang for Mrs. Donovan and told her to clear away the glasses and mop up the moisture on the floor. While she was doing this, he informed her that he would be sitting up late, and she must not be alarmed if she was awakened in the middle of the night by voices, as he was expecting another visitor whose arrival might be delayed.

He sensed her entire dissatisfaction with his statement, and wondered if he looked as disturbed as he certainly felt. But she said nothing and confined her comments to sniffs of distaste as she departed holding the glass from which Ah Fing had partaken as though it were contaminated.

There was the course dictated by common sense open to Thorpe. He was on the telephone and it would take him about thirty seconds to get into communication with the local police headquarters. Or by stepping to his own gate at ten-fifteen, he could pass the time of night with Constables Judd and Mack, who met at the corner at that hour in the course of their beats.

That was dictated by common sense. Rodney Thorpe was an average man, neither foolhardy nor a coward. Ah Fing had put it crudely that he was in danger of getting his throat cut.

But in that respect, common sense swung around to take the other side of the argument. Thorpe had seen Peter the Less and sized the man up. He was a crook, if you like, but not a murderer by choice. He belonged to the *Artful Dodger* class, the slick, the sleek, the manicured; a man who would devote the courage and energy at his disposal to tricking women rather than to attacking men.

The more Thorpe thought about it, the more convinced he was that Ah Fing had committed an astounding error of judgment for one so astute.

Peter would scarcely dare appear within a stone's throw of Fairlawn.

Nevertheless, leaving the police out of it, the doctor took a few precautions. He got out his revolver—a rusty relic of university days, when target practise was the fashion—and amused himself by cleaning it thoroughly and loading it with some dubious cartridges that had lain for a long time in a moldy box in the greenhouse.

With the passing of the storm, the air outside was fresh and clear.

Through the surgery door which he had left open, he heard the voices of the people in the next house bidding good night to some guests. Their nearness implied a pleasant sense of companionship.

Then the voices eased off and from a little further away came the sound of a piano. Another voice rose sweetly and sadly in song. The doctor recognized it for Lilian's, and it gave him something of a shock. She was singing an old ballad that had been a favorite of her husband's. Since Harry Ashe's death the piano in the drawing-room had remained closed. Why, on this of all evenings, should Lilian choose to open it?

"After the day has sung its song of sorrow,
And one by one the little stars appear,
I linger yet where once we met, beloved,
And seem to feel thy presence still is near."

The throbbing quality of the notes carried the full distance and filled Thorpe with a sense of discomfiture. Lounging against the framework of the door with the old revolver in his hand, he listened to her and thought of Anne. He longed to be with Anne, to heal the breach that had come between them.

"The flowers are dead that blossomed in that spring-time.
The birds are mute that sang their songs above.
. . . .
Time cannot break the magic chord of love."

Thorpe dropped the revolver into his coat pocket. There was a sound on the gravel path, as though some one had stirred restlessly.

By this time the doctor's eyes were accustomed to the darkness. He glanced casually in the direction from which the sound came. Whoever was there would think his attention had been attracted; not in the least that he was disturbed or apprehensive, which he was. At this precise instant he would have given much to know that Judd was on the watch for unwelcome visitors.

"Still we can love, although the shadows lengthen;
Still we can hope, through sorry and through pain;
Come to my heart and whisper through the sadness:
'Hope on, dear heart, our lives shall meet again.'"

The song ended on a note of triumph. Then silence; absolute dead silence.

Thorpe thought he must have been mistaken about the shifting step on the gravel. His eyes could distinguish nothing, either.

It was now eleven o'clock according to the church bell. Time for suburbanites to lock up and go to bed.

And then brisk, light steps were coming toward him out of the darkness, in nowise surreptitious. They moved from the spot he had suspected. Whoever it was had paused to listen to Lilian's song.

Ah Fing would have won his sovereign.

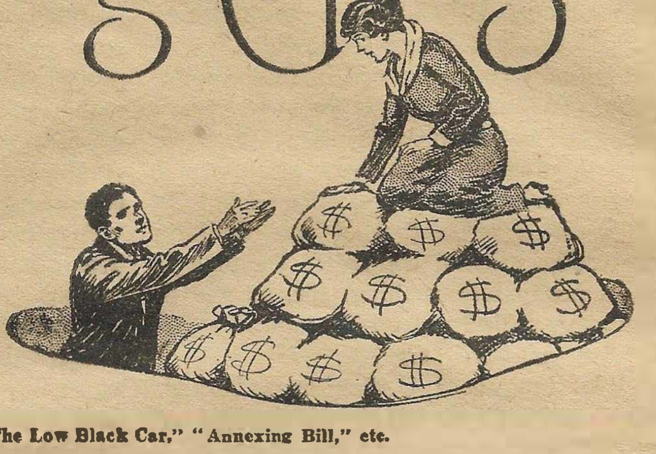
Thorpe recognized at once the slim, arrogant figure of Peter the Less even before he could distinguish the man's features.

(To be continued NEXT WEEK.)

Anything Goes

by

Edgar Franklin



Author of "The Low Black Car," "Annexing Bill," etc.

CHAPTER XV.

THE UNEXPECTED ONE.

DOWN at the bottom of the long, grassy slope, after as wild a run as he remembered taking in all his life, Wilbur Fenn pulled up and looked about.

Joseph was galloping splendidly ten yards behind—and that was really all. Up above, the tents and the thin, discordant blare of brass indicated that the circus was still proceeding, but from its precincts no force of human brutes belched forth to pursue and slay young Mr. Fenn.

"That—that was foolish!" he panted.

"Sav-saving your face?" the camera-man asked gustily and indignantly.

"I wasn't thinking of my face—I was thinking about that five-dollar bill," the twenty-seven-hundred-and-fifty-dollar star said bitterly. "We might have gotten that by sticking around a little longer, Joe."

"When he could have had you beaten into a jelly without spending a cent!"

Wilbur sighed.

"It might not have happened. Diplomacy 'll do a lot," he mused.

"Not when the other fellow has a club," said Joseph. "Have you got everything?"

"Everything I had when we went in there—yes. I'm glad I'd finished dressing before it started. Camera all right?"

"Never touched it," smiled Joe Bush. "Shall we—er—go back to Harpertown?"

"*No!*" vociferated Wilbur Fenn, and caught his soaring voice and dragged it down again. "We picked the right side of the hill to run down, anyway, Joe. We don't have to see Harpertown again. That looks like a State road, too, over there. Come on!"

"Where this time?"

Wilbur Fenn looked at his old friend with real concern.

"The sane and proper thing for you to do is to head north, get back to Craneville, tell Lester that your sick mother's all right again, stick fast to it, and look stupid if he asks you questions, and get back to work. I appreciate your company, Joe, but I don't want you to lose that job."

Joe Bush scowled directly at his friend.

"Say! Did we start for Philadelphia?" he demanded.

"Yes."

"Then which way's Philadelphia now?" snapped the camera-man. "We're losing time."

"Stick, then, you poor demented creature," Wilbur sighed; "but it seems to me that one idiot's enough for this expedition—and I'm filling the bill nicely. Ah, it is State road! All we need now is an automobile."

This story began in The Argosy for March 16.

The subject was too tender—the jest died in Wilbur's throat and failed to produce even a perfunctory smile upon his friend's countenance. North and south this highway ran, and since the latter was their direction they turned to the left and trudged along in silence for a while.

"I wonder what the end of this is going to be?" Wilbur muttered presently.

"Why, we haven't more than fifty miles or so to go and—" Joe began brightly and encouragingly.

"I didn't mean that—I was thinking about that infernal contract. Jumping it was a pretty serious thing, Joe, no matter how many frills I put on the jump."

"Are you—er—sorry?"

"No, I'm not!" Wilbur Fenn barked. "What with Tolliver's detectives and all the rest, Lester probably knows I'm alive and well by this time; and I'll have to hire a whole troop of alienists to testify that the shock gave me wandering dementia, or something of the kind, before we get it straightened out, but I'm hanged if I'm sorry. By thunder," cried young Mr. Fenn vehemently, "I'll get to Philadelphia now if it wrecks the surety company and the Pinnacle Company and winds up by my getting shot on sight! I'll get there if—"

"Well, I understand," Joe Bush said soothingly. "And I guess the best way to get there is to take it a little more calmly, Will. Tolliver can't marry that girl in a day or two, you know—that kind of rich people don't rush weddings along like that. Even if we have to walk the whole way on a pair of empty stomachs we'll get there by to-morrow night. You've got other friends down that way?"

"Some."

"Then you can borrow a little and we can clean up and eat and get a few hours of sleep in a real bed, and be as good as ever," Joe pursued brightly. "Maybe we won't have to walk. Maybe— Wait a minute!"

"For what?"

The camera-man grinned brilliantly at Wilbur Fenn.

"Have you got that white beard still?"

"Of course."

"The wig with it?"

"Yes—they're rolled up together."

"Let's stray into this nice, thick little patch of woods, Will," said Joe Bush. "I think I have a line on this thing now!"

As earlier in the day they had vanished from public view and entered a vine-clad porch so now they vanished again—and with results rather more impressive. For where two Italians had emerged from the porch, an old, old man and his son came out of the woods.

And he was more than merely old—he was a poor, tottering creature, bowed by trouble and the years, no more than able to shuffle along. His clothes, soiled and rumpled, seemed to hang on him, and he leaned heavily on a thick stick, cut in the woods; and when he spoke it was in a thin, querulous quaver. Joseph Bush sighed and shook his head, entirely pleased.

"You'll do, pop," said he. "You look about a million and sick at that."

"I'm in pretty bad shape, Joey," said the cracked voice. "I dunno's I'll ever make it walking."

"Well, if this section isn't populated by the gang that went through Belgium, you won't have to walk long, papa," the camera-man opined. "Anybody with a buggy and half a heart would give you a ride if he had to walk himself."

"Keep your eye peeled, Joey," said the old, old man, "and pick a good-natured looking one, if such a thing ever turns up. What's the matter with this road, anyway? Doesn't anybody ever use it?"

"Car coming now!" Joe said quickly as he thrust a helpful hand under the old man's arm. "Going our way, Will?"

"Seats in it?"

"Yep! Woman driving—and she's all alone," breathed the camera-man as his ostensible parent stumbled weakly and ended with quite an artistic recovery. "She has her eye on us, too. Nice, kind-looking lady, Will. It's a shame—"

"You cut out the conscience and hold her up," snarled the old man through his whiskers. "You can cry about it after we get aboard."

Joseph's pathetic, humble upward gaze sufficed. Apologetically, lovingly, he was just drawing his parent from the road so that the car might pass when brakes squeaked beside them and a cheery voice called:

"Do you want a lift?"

"Why—why, lady?" stammered Joseph. "If you'd take me and pop a little ways—just as far as you're going—"

"Hey?" rasped Wilbur Fenn, cupping his ear and leaning forward.

"This lady's going to ride us along a little ways, pop," Joseph yelled into the ear. "Think you can get in?"

"Why—yes," the old man cackled delightedly as he fumbled for the door which the sympathetic soul had opened for him. "Take me—a minute, but—why, this is mighty kind, lady."

His own conscience dealt him a considerable blow, however; the lady's eyes were moist as she said:

"You poor, old soul. Take all the time you need. I'm in no hurry. There—are you in?"

"Yes, ma'am, pop's all right now—thank you very much," Joe said with embarrassment not altogether simulated. "All comfortable, pop?"

"Yes, indeed, Joey," the thin voice informed them. "Good—good sight more comfortable than we ever expected to be, hey? We—we—'tain't right, lady, for us to be imposing on you this way. We—"

"Oh, don't be silly!" laughed the evident owner of the car as she started it with nicest care.

Well, it seemed rather a low-down trick, but possibly justified by circumstances; and whether justified or not, they had played it, and they were rolling along at some twenty-five miles an hour, headed due south. Young Mr. Fenn, having pulled his hat down a trifle farther and made sure that the wind was not disturbing his whiskers, leaned heavily on his cane and cackled to his attentive son; and after a time the lady glanced back.

"Your father?"

"Yes, ma'am," said Joseph.

"He's pretty old, isn't he?" the sympathetic voice pursued.

"Yes, ma'am—eighty," said Joseph.

"Dear me—and walking like that!"

"Yes, ma'am," sighed Joseph.

Two or three miles passed in silence; then:

"Do you live around here?"

"Why, no, ma'am," said the cameraman. "We—we're sort of working our way down from New Hampshire."

"They—they sold the old farm plumb over my head," Wilbur shrilled helpfully and unexpectedly. "They turned me out o' house and home!"

"*Really?*" cried their benefactress.

"Plumb—out o' house and home!" quavered Wilbur, and bowed his head.

Two more silent miles; then the lady turned again with a quiet little smile.

"Going far?"

"We're going to get to Philadelphia some way," said Joseph.

"Haven't you any money to go on the train?" the lady asked directly.

"No, ma'am," said Joseph, conscious that for once he was telling the truth.

The car rolled on for another space; then it slowed and the lady faced them for a moment.

"Have you friends in Philadelphia?"

"Pop's younger brother, lady."

"You're going to live with him?"

"Yes, ma'am," Joe said bravely. "He couldn't send us no money for railroad fare, but once I get a job—"

"Well, you needn't worry any more about getting there," the lady said astonishingly. "I'll run you down myself."

After that the car picked up speed; and whatever his private opinion of themselves, young Mr. Fenn sat fast, with a hand on his whiskers, while Joe Bush, a really sensitive soul, gazed at the flying landscape with a frown, puckered his lips now and then, and once or twice flushed.

They were attaining the main object though. Later on, Wilbur thought, he'd get track of the lady by memorizing her license number and write her a really decent letter, apologizing for the deception and explaining the vast good she had really done under a misapprehension.

Yes, and they'd be in Philadelphia long before dark at this rate. Young Mr. Fenn put his mind to the problem and decided that they had better be dropped at the

Broad Street Station, where sooner or later his brother would come to find them. He was just deciding on a name for his family when the car slowed down beside another railroad station—a little, trim affair at the edge of a little trim town.

"I'm just going to run in here and send a wire to my husband," their benefactress explained. "He's expecting me home by this time, and I want to tell him where I am and that I won't be back till late."

She hesitated, dimpling.

"There's a lunch-counter in here, I believe. Shall I—shall I get you a little something? Your father might like—just what would he like?"

"He wouldn't like anything," Joe Bush exploded. "Thank you very much, lady, but some folks gave us a good hot dinner just before we met you."

Then she had tripped into the station and Wilbur muttered wistfully and gloomily:

"Why did you say that, Joey?"

"Gosh, I've got a limit!" the cameraman cried fiercely under his breath.

"So have I, and I suppose every mouthful 'd have stuck—to some extent, anyway," mused Wilbur. "But we could have made it up to her later, bless her little heart! Um—well! Cute little town, Joe."

"Nice little place, Will."

"And not more than twenty-five or thirty miles from Philadelphia, at a guess," said the eminent star. "This is luck, Joseph."

"It shows that if you decline to quit nothing much can happen to you."

"It certainly does," agreed Wilbur Fenn. "I guess I'd better do a little doddering now, Joe. Here's a train coming in."

He bent low over his cane and permitted his senile tremble to return, uneasily wishing the while that the lady would send her telegram and get under way again. Not that there was any risk of being overtaken by Tolliver's men at this juncture, but—

"Why—why, Wilbur Fenn!" cried a too, too familiar voice.

The wearer of the white whiskers sat up so suddenly that his head came near to jerking from his shoulders. His ears had not gone mad—his eyes were not deceiving him now. There was Violet Wayne, a little grip in her hand and a wondering smile on her full, pretty lips!

And Violet had recognized Joe, of course. And Violet knew this particular make-up perfectly, because he had worn it in the studio—in the only old-man part he had ever essayed. And now Violet was standing there, smiling still, and people were looking interestedly as they hurried from the train and to their homes.

Wilbur stepped out suddenly and Joseph Bush stumbled after him.

"Say, where did you—where did you—" escaped him crazily.

"What on earth are you doing?" Miss Wayne inquired.

And being a mischievous, ridiculous creature at best, she piled on the last straw just then: she reached upward with dainty, tapering fingers and twitched the thick white beard from young Mr. Fenn, so that he stood there with only the shaggy wig and the down-pulled hat to suggest age!

Yet, having gone so far, Violet subsided suddenly, plainly startled by Wilbur's expression. His lately blinking eyes were glinting at her; his lately loose mouth had set hard and furiously; and Violet's smile faded and she stammered:

"Wilbur! Don't—don't look at me like that. Don't—"

"Don't call me 'Wilbur' at the top of your lungs, and don't stand there swinging my whiskers in your hand!" Mr. Fenn snarled feverishly. "Give me back that beard and then *run!*"

"But—"

"You've done me harm enough, Vi! Don't wreck anything else by—"

Joseph's voice broke in forlornly.

"It's all off, Will!"

"What?"

"She's coming and she's looking this way!"

"Then—by the mighty—" Wilbur Fenn gasped at Violet Wayne, who screamed faintly and backed away, beard and all.

She might have saved herself the move. Just then young Mr. Fenn had no idea of ending her miserable existence, for his whole, heartbroken attention was on that trim, kindly, pretty young matron who had brought them to the station.

She had paused very briefly, eyes open. Then, being a positive and intelligent person, she had seemed to grip something of the situation—she was approaching with a firm tread and smoldering fire in her eye.

"Was it a joke?" she asked crisply.

"Yes, it—it *was* a joke," Wilbur said uncertainly, flushing and also trying to smile. "You see—"

"I've gone twenty miles out of my way to help you; I've used up time and gas and left my husband to the mercies of a new cook. I fail to see the joke," ticked into his consciousness.

"I know," said young Mr. Fenn, "and it will take a lot of apologizing before—"

The angry red of the lady's cheeks grew redder. She half-turned away.

"Spare yourself that trouble," she said briefly. "And thank you for making a complete fool of me!"

She turned; she took three steps; she stopped for an instant and her voice shook.

"And if you really are trying to get to Philadelphia, I hope from the bottom of my heart that you never make it," she added feelingly.

And now she was in her comfortable car, and they heard the floor creak as she pressed on the starter pedal. The motor roared angrily; the car started with a jerk, took a dizzy turn in the graveled circle behind the station and whirled off in a cloud of dust, bound for home.

"Your friend has some pep!" Miss Wayne remarked.

Wilbur Fenn, ever gallant to this particular lady, whirled upon her.

"Don't make any comments on *her*—d'ye hear? Why in blazes did you have to turn up just when—"

"Wilbur, I never had any more idea of meeting you here than I had of meeting the man in the moon!" Miss Wayne protested with very genuine earnestness. "I came down here for a flying visit to my aunt."

"She—you've got an aunt here?"

"How could I visit her if I hadn't?" Violet asked reasonably enough and risking a closer approach. "Don't shout like that—and don't glare. People are staring at you, Wilbur. Take off that silly wig and—and come over here with me, where it's quiet, and I'll tell you what little there is to tell."

The latest crash, even to its echoes, was dying out. Something inside Wilbur seemed to be turning slightly weak; he looked about dazedly and removed his wig, which he passed to the dark-browed Joseph. He even permitted Violet Fenn to take his arm in quite a conventional fashion and to lead him away, down the station platform and toward the deserted freight-house.

"Well, that's better, anyway," Miss Wayne said with a sigh of relief.

"It may be better for you, but it isn't better for me," snapped Mr. Fenn. "She was going to take us to—"

"Philadelphia?"

"All the way!"

"To see Miss Morrow and straighten out that little trouble?"

"Naturally."

Miss Wayne glanced up at him, her round eyes rather deep.

"Why didn't you go on the train?"

Wilbur laughed harshly.

"I don't know how much you know or how much you don't know," said he, "and I'm not going to stand here and spin the tale for your edification; but the reason we're not on the train is that we haven't the price."

"I don't know a thing, Wilbur," Violet said quietly, "except that they think you're dead—back in Craneville. There's a big mystery somewhere—or there was two hours ago—when they dismissed the company for the day and I left the studio. Nobody says anything, but they've got gangs of men out looking for you, I think. Hemming said something must have happened to you when you jumped, and I—I wondered if you hadn't made it happen," murmured Miss Wayne, glancing up suddenly. "Tell me about it, Will. I'll never breathe a word."

"I know it," Wilbur said grimly. "And I have no time to stay here and tell the story of my life, Violet. Pardon me, but—I'm going."

He disengaged his arm and would have strode away but that—well, the eyes detained him for a moment. They were, indeed, wonderful eyes—even Wilbur Fenn conceded that much to himself, standing there impatiently. Any man likely to be driven crazy by beautiful eyes would have gone stark, staring mad, once Violet went to work on him with hers!

Nor, come to think of it, had he ever seen them just as they were now, although one afternoon, a year back, they had looked somewhat the same. Be it breathed, in the most cautious whisper, that for about ten minutes, one afternoon, Wilbur had wondered if Violet Wayne were not an exceptionally attractive young woman, after all; and during the same period—and according to senseless studio rumors for a period of weeks afterward—there had really been a suspicion that Miss Wayne regarded Wilbur as an exceptionally attractive young man. So far as Wilbur, at least, was concerned, that was all there had ever been to a romance that never existed; but just the same, if eyes could hypnotize a person who fairly abominated their owner—

" Don't go for a moment, Will," Miss Wayne said very softly. " I—I want to tell you something."

" What?" snapped Mr. Fenn.

The eyes blazed at him for a second, all dark, lurid fire, and then dropped.

" Just that I—acted like a beast and that I'm — very sorry and very much ashamed of myself," Miss Wayne said with some difficulty.

" All right, Vi," Wilbur said uncomfortably.

" Will you forgive me?"

" I'll have to," young Mr. Fenn said with a small, puzzled smile.

" Really, Will?" Miss Wayne asked tremulously, placing a little hand on his arm and looking up suddenly.

Shall it be admitted that Wilbur, in the full flare of that gaze, smiled suddenly and humanly, and not at all as a young man should have smiled at the cause of all his troubles? Better, perhaps, that it be not admitted. Wilbur then did not smile, but there was certainly no overwhelming rage in his voice as he said:

" Yes, really, Vi. I suppose, knowing you as well as I do, you weren't so much to blame. A pile of money like that was a temptation and—"

" I'm sending that back to him."

" Are you?"

" And I want to help you, Will," Miss Wayne answered very earnestly. " I want to do all I can do to undo the trouble I've made."

" Then—"

" Are you really broke, Will?"

" Absolutely," Wilbur said unguardedly.

" I've got over a hundred dollars with me," said Miss Wayne, and she seemed to be having another struggle with herself, for she twisted her glove about one forefinger and the grip of her other hand on Wilbur Fenn's arm tightened nervously. " Wilbur, let me go down there with you and to—to her. Let me tell her the whole truth about everything; I'll do that—every word of it—and she will understand, because I'll make her understand. And then everything will be all right between you."

And again, inscrutably, bewilderingly, the eyes blazed at Wilbur.

" Because I—I want you to be happy, Will," choked Miss Wayne.

" Will you—really do that?" Wilbur stammered.

" Do you want me to?"

" It would be the kindest act you ever did, Vi."

" Then I'll do it, Will," breathed Miss Wayne.

And she did more, right then and there. Without warning she threw one slender arm about Wilbur Fenn's neck; it tightened and the eyes looked into his very soul as they came closer, causing Wilbur's head to reel. And the lips were coming toward his, there in the secluded corner of the station platform, not in any studio fashion, but as the lips of a vibrant girl, a despairing girl whose love had overcome her!

Miss Wayne, not to dwell upon this painful and unexpected scene, kissed Wilbur Fenn hotly, lingeringly—drew her lovely head back for an instant to look at him—kissed him again and whispered:

" This is good-by, Will. Oh, this is—good-by! I'm going to give you to her!"

" Violet!" Wilbur said thickly, amazedly.

For never, never had he suspected that Miss Wayne cared for him like that. And she had turned limp now, poor little thing!

She was nestling against him yearningly, with heaving breast and the hand still clutching his sleeve as she pressed close. And is it to be counted against Wilbur that, brain spinning, he put his arms about the slim form suddenly and held it tightly? Doubtless it should be, whether it is or not, but there is no denying that Wilbur did it; even Joe Bush saw him from where he stood down the platform, and his mouth opened wide.

Overwhelming emotion had shaken the unfortunate girl for a minute or two, but she was regaining her composure now. Several times she sobbed, her head hidden on Wilbur's shoulder; then she drew gently away from him, eyes downcast, unable to face him as he muttered:

"Vi, I—I never knew—I never thought—"

Miss Wayne looked up bravely and placed a dainty hand on Wilbur's either cheek.

"Now you know why I did it, Will, and you know why I'm—doing this for you, and we'll never speak of it again, Will?"

"No, Violet," Wilbur said solemnly, for he was, after all, on his way to Philadelphia.

"I'll run in and phone my aunt," Miss Wayne said, almost herself again, although she declined to look at him. "I phoned her that I was coming, and she'll be expecting me. Then we'll take the next train, or, if there isn't a train soon enough, we'll hire a car or something."

She was gone! Wilbur Fenn, staring after her, discovered that he wore a fixed and senseless smile. Ten minutes ago all had been well; five minutes ago all had been ruined; now all was well again and rather better than before! It was decidedly confusing.

Young Mr. Fenn, still in his not wholly unpleasant daze, looked about for his faithful camera-man, who had vanished, and then strolled slowly back down the platform. Even now he could not quite comprehend—except that this strange eruption of Violet's chimed perfectly with as queer and busy a day as had ever been jammed into his life. Why, he had hardly thought of the girl as alive—outside the studio! He—no, he could not understand it. But she was a white, clean little sport at that, wasn't she? In the next five minutes Wilbur Fenn revised his opinion of Miss Violet Wayne.

Other things were happening in the same five minutes. An up-train had rolled in, paused very briefly and rolled out again some time ago. Several passengers had hurried by the pensively smiling young man, with the assorted dirt-spots and rumpled hair, and now Joe Bush was ambling into sight, his own face something of a study.

"What was the idea of the love-stuff, Will?" he asked flatly.

"Eh?" Wilbur grinned softly. "She repented, Joe."

"How?"

"Every way there is, I guess. She's coming down to Philadelphia with us and help smooth things out."

Joe Bush's face wrinkled.

"I don't get you?" he said.

"She has plenty of money with her and she's lending me some. She's going to Miss Morrow with me, and—"

"Is that why she hopped on the train back to Craneville just now?" the camera-man inquired.

"Hopped on—what?"

"Certainly she did," said Joseph Bush. "She came through that station like a fire-engine just as the train was pulling out and made a jump for the last car. She spotted me over there and stood on the back platform, grinning and kissing her hand to me and—"

"She's *gone?*"

Blankly Wilbur gazed at his friend, trying to read a meaning not conveyed by his words, but if he was confused, Joe Bush was not. Frowning, he nodded at Wilbur Fenn and spoke sharply:

"Of course she is—and a good job, too, if you have to curse her one minute and squeeze her the next. Don't sag like that, Will. If we're ever going to get down there we have to make another start. You look like sin, too! Button up your vest and your shirt and—"

As if a club had smitten him from behind Wilbur Fenn's head went forward and his eyes downward. However it had happened it was the truth: shirt and vest were alike unbuttoned and—Wilbur's hand, suddenly turned to ice, slid beneath both just as the other hand slapped madly outside the vest.

And then, eyes popping, face white, Mr. Fenn summed up the whole situation:

"She pinched it!"

"Pinched what?"

"Joe!" shouted the star. "She—*she stole her own confession!*"

CHAPTER XVI.

NEWS FROM THE FRONT.

SUCH a few seconds back Joe Bush had been downright sharp and angry with his friend and idol! But now his anger vanished, and cold, stunning horror showed in every line of him, for he was a devoted soul.

"Not her confession about—about night before last?" he cried.

"Do you suppose I'm carrying a line of confessions covering her whole blasted little crooked lifetime?" Wilbur demanded wildly, and it might almost have been suspected that his sentiments toward Miss Wayne had undergone a change. "Where's that train?"

"Two miles away now, and—"

"We've got to catch it!" young Mr. Fenn announced.

Joseph gripped his arms tightly.

"Be calm, Will. Be calm," he cautioned. "You know just as well as I do that you can't—that station-agent's looking at you."

"I see him," said Wilbur; and his friend observed that he had indeed become calm; he was, if anything, becoming actually lethargic now, for the last disaster had been a terror.

For the very reason of their whole wild chase was gone now. The convincing piece of evidence that might reasonably have been expected to sway Miss Morrow, once Wilbur attained her presence, had returned to its original source and—there was really no hope at all.

"And I fell for that!" Wilbur muttered, sickened.

"Wilbur, I thought you were falling for something when I saw you with her arms around your neck and you hugging her!" Joseph sighed.

"Did you?" muttered Wilbur Fenn. "Well, you were right and I was wrong, I fancy. I let her hand me a trick ten million years old, and it was just as good as the first time the first woman played it."

"What was she—er—doing?" Joe risked.

"Telling me that she loved me, and that she was making the supreme sacrifice of her life by passing me along to the other woman, the nasty little—oh, bah!" said Mr. Fenn. "I wonder how much Tolliver 'll pay for *that?*"

"Another five thousand, probably."

"It ought to be worth it. Was she trailing us?"

"How could she have been? It was just bad luck, Wilbur. Now, I imagine that—"

Young Mr. Fenn stayed him.

"Never mind, Joe. It doesn't matter how it happened. It did happen, and I'm through."

"Ready to go back, you mean?"

"Eh?" Wilbur smiled tartly. "Yes, I'm ready enough, without that confession; but I think we'll go on to Philadelphia, Joe. We're nearer there than Craneville, and I can borrow money enough to take us back."

"And it isn't so much of a walk, either," the camera-man said hopefully.

"It's a darned sight more of a walk than I'm going to take. Tolliver hasn't any one watching that trolley line over there, Joe."

"No, and we haven't any money to pay fare with."

"Such being the case, we'll ride without paying," said Wilbur "Go in and ask the agent whether it'll land us in the beastly town."

He himself walked up and down, growling and seeking something to curse — he found it in Jennison. It was, in the last analysis, all Jennison's fault. If Jennison had never contracted the habit of getting his chauffeurs from asylums for the weak-minded they would have been in Philadelphia, safe and sound, hours ago. If Jennison had not developed that fit of vicarious economy they would have been there now, anyway. So Wilbur spoke softly to the still, warm air regarding Jennison—and any properly sensitive air, before he had finished, would have rushed away and left a vacuum.

He was dealing with Jennison's more remote ancestry when Joe returned, tired and dirty, but still cheerful.

"He says we can get on here and ride to the end of the line—I forget the town; but when we get there we walk two blocks to the court-house square and then get on another line that'll take us right into Phillie," he reported.

"All right. Here comes the car."

"Well, about fare, I'll—"

"Don't bother me," groaned young Mr. Fenn. "I have trouble enough now without fussing about their infernal fare."

This was a long, heavy car, through which a nice, fresh breeze blew. The conductor looked them over rather dubiously as they entered, to be sure, but offered no objection to their riding, and in the forward end Wilbur selected a cross-seat and settled down with his rather nervous friend.

And thus, when they had gone a bare quarter of a mile, the conductor found them as he uttered his polite:

"Fare, please!"

Wilbur Fenn was fumbling inside his vest. He looked up with an artless smile that would have disarmed a chief of detectives.

"Just a few minutes," his mildest voice said. "I'll have to give you a bill—and they're pinned inside here. They're pretty scarce these days, and we have to take care of 'em."

"You said it," agreed the conductor, who was really a good and unsuspicious sort, and, after another moment of fumbling and a frown from Wilbur as he loosened further buttons, the conductor loitered to the rear.

"How long can you stretch that out, Will?" Joe asked uneasily.

"The pathetic stuff comes next," said Mr. Fenn as he fumbled on.

The better part of another mile was behind them before the conductor made the trip again.

"Fare!" said he.

"Mister," said Wilbur Fenn, and turned a stricken face upward, "I guess I've lost the roll."

"Well—"

"Say, will it shock anybody if I take off my vest in here?" the shabby traveler inquired, and his perturbation seemed very real. "It must have slipped down into the lining."

"You better find it pretty quick," the conductor informed him.

"Well, you're not any more anxious than I am about it," Wilbur laughed wretchedly. "There was eleven dollars in that roll, and—can you lend me a pen-knife for a couple of minutes?"

His vest and coat were both off now—the former lay across his knees and trembling hands accepted the official's pocket-knife—hands that trembled so violently that he could hardly open the blade.

"Eleven bones—and that has to last for two weeks, till the job's ready for me," he chattered. "My Lord! If that's gone, I might as well get out and lie down on the rails. Where's the stitching on this thing? Once I get it open who'll ever sew it up for me again? Well, that doesn't matter so much as the eleven bones, anyway. Say, if that money's really *gone*—"

"He's back on the platform now," Joseph whispered.

"Is he?" said Mr. Fenn. "Keep an eye on him without looking at him, Joe. When he starts in again you start for him and spend some time looking under the seats. That ought to do for another mile or two."

Frantically he sawed on at stitches, muttering, shrugging, once even rolling his head in an agony of despair; and at that point Joseph started up and began looking beneath the seats.

Unfortunately it was rather a short and simple job, for the car was empty but for themselves. Still, Joseph did it well and carefully, explaining that his poor friend was nearly crazy over the loss, and the conductor hunted with him—and hunted—and still hunted, now crouching, now kneeling with Joe Bush, now hazarding the opinion that the money had been lost somewhere else.

And the car bowled on toward Philadelphia.

And now the conductor, having poked his finger into every possible cranny in the entire vehicle, arose and stretched, and his chin seemed squarer to Joe Bush and his eye less considerate.

"Well, the long and the short of it is that it ain't here," he stated. "Ain't you got any money, friend?"

"Not a red cent!" said Joe Bush.

"You'll have to get off."

"But—"

"Nothing doing, old man," the conductor said firmly, and pulled the bell. "I'd like to keep you here free, but the feller that had this run up to last week lost it account of doing the same thing—and I got two kids. Hey, young feller; you gotter get off!"

"Me?" cried Wilbur Fenn, starting up.

"Both of you."

"Oh, have a heart," the eminent star begged. "We're trying to get to a couple of good jobs and—"

"You've got two weeks to walk it in—whatever it is."

"I know, but when a man—"

"Say, listen, young feller," the conductor interrupted and squared his shoulders. "We all have our troubles, but that doesn't let you ride free on this car. Come on! It's easier walking off than getting put off."

It may have been that his patience was exhausted; it may have been that the conductor assumed the manner to conceal the aching tenderness of his heart, or it may have been that his trained sense had penetrated the fraud—but he meant business now. He stood and waited, looking directly at Joseph Bush; and Mr. Bush, after a glance at his friend, turned and walked to the door, where a quick, deft push sent him to the still country road, several feet away.

"You next," the now unfeeling conductor announced.

"Let my friend get aboard and let me look once more for—" young Mr. Fenn began.

It was a tactical blunder, apparently. It caused the conductor to smile cynically and reach for Wilbur Fenn, and when his hand came down there was no effort at gentleness. The hand, in fact, struck hard and—Wilbur had suffered mightily that day. His fist came up suddenly.

Some incidents there be rather too shocking for any detailed description; this was one of them. From his view-point in the outer world, Joe Bush fancied for a moment that the car had exploded; seats seemed to be breaking, and both gentlemen inside to be yelling at once. As a reeling, thrashing unit, they surged to the back platform, just as the motorman, after a glance of understanding, took off his controller handle and started through the car.

There was a staggering crash, too, as the rear window splintered—and there the motorman completed his trip, and Wilbur, as a ball, was flying through the air, victim of numbers and weight.

Catlike, he landed on his feet, panting. The conductor, on his platform, laughed breathlessly through puffing lips.

"Here, you — take your paper!" he cried. "I don't want none o' your junk on this car. And the next time you want to beat your way, pick an easy mark. Go ahead, Dick."

The car moved on.

"Are you hurt?" Joe Bush cried.

"Nowhere that—I feel just now," Wilbur Fenn reassured him when words would come.

"He never got to your face, but he split your coat and—he tore that pants leg, too, Will."

"Did he? We'll sue the company," young Mr. Fenn managed to laugh. "He got two or three that were coming to Jennison and a couple I'd have liked to plant on Violet, if she could turn man for a while, and—phew!"

"Sit down a while, Will," Joseph counseled. "That was a crazy thing to do, anyway. Take a rest."

Wilbur Fenn hesitated and obeyed, seating himself on the grassy bank and looking over his damaged raiment. It was not particularly interesting. He reached for the paper, mistakenly thrown after him by the kindly conductor, and doubtless the property of some earlier passenger. He opened it and glanced at the heading. It was a Philadelphia morning edition, and, as such, likely to contain no single item that could claim his attention.

And still, news is news, and there was a considerable war going on, and he had not had a chance at a paper that day. Young Mr. Fenn, smoothing down his hair with one hand, flattened out the sheet. Joseph Bush, leaning forward, idly scanned the opposite page.

"French Infantry Repulses—" Wilbur began.

"*Will!*" cried the camera-man.

"What in blazes—"

"Will! Look! Look here! The society news!" shouted the demented Joseph, his grimy finger thrust at the topmost item. "Look at that and look at the picture! It's *her!*"

Wilbur Fenn caught his breath and bent forward.

And it was there—Beatrice Morrow's own photograph!

And beneath it his aching eyes found:

MORROW-TOLLIVER WEDDING SUDDEN AFFAIR.

The wedding of Miss Beatrice Morrow, only daughter of Merwin Morrow, to Henry Tolliver, head and present owner of the Tolliver Company and one of the wealthiest young men in Philadelphia society, takes place this evening at nine o'clock at the home of the bride's parents. Because of the suddenness of the affair, caused by the unexpected departure to-morrow of the groom for Hawaii, the guests will be limited to members of the two families and a few intimate friends. It is said that, although unannounced, the engagement of Miss Morrow to Mr. Tolliver became a fact several months ago. The wedding was to have taken place in the late autumn, but urgent business called Mr. Tolliver to Honolulu, and the pair decided upon a Pacific honeymoon. It was rumored at one time that Miss Morrow was to marry Wilbur Fenn, the motion-picture star, but when seen this morning her father denied emphatically that such had ever been the case.

The morning paper fluttered to the ground, for it had been quite unable to keep pace with Wilbur's sudden rising.

"Nine o'clock!" he shrieked. "*Nine o'clock to-night!*"

"Well, don't start running like that!" Joseph begged amazedly, as he gathered up his camera and raced after his afflicted friend.

"You needn't come," Wilbur shouted back.

"But you—you can't run all the way to Philadelphia," the camera man sought to point out as he tore after the tattered figure.

"I can run every damned step of the way and then have breath enough left to kill Tolliver," the unhappy young man called over his shoulder. "I'll get there now if I have to crush the life out of every man, woman, and child that gets in the way. I'll—"

He stopped short. He reeled. Instinctively he threw up his hands, because from nowhere at all the black muzzle of an old army revolver had been pushed into his very face and he could see the noses of several real bullets in the cylinder.

And he had stopped because of his headlong collision with a broad, heavy, brutal-looking man of fifty-five or sixty—a man whose face was all hard right-angles, whose gray hair was stiff and coarse, whose cold, cruel blue eyes gave never the slightest flicker.

"What in—" Wilbur gasped.

"Keep those hands up!" the astonishing person barked. "You, too, back there. Turn around."

"But I don't want to—"

"Turn around or I'll shoot you."

"Why?" inquired Wilbur, turning, nevertheless, and looking back at the apparent maniac.

That person shook his big head and pointed at one ear.

"I'm stone deaf," he shouted.

"Well — you can read?" Wilbur implored, scribbling suggestively with one forefinger on the palm of his upheld hand.

"Never mind getting out a pencil," the unknown roared at him. "I've got you, now. I may be stone deaf and getting old, but—by the mighty! I can do my bit in cleaning up the tramps in this section."

"Are we being arrested?" Wilbur bellowed.

"I can't hear you," the other informed him most impatiently, and he drew back the hammer of his formidable weapon. "Now keep turned around that way and—*march!*"

CHAPTER XVII.

FROM THERE ELSEWHERE.

INTO the small of Mr. Fenn's back the hard muzzle poked.

Wilbur walked as a man in a dreadful nightmare, from the road to the side path, along the side path for possibly fifty yards, and then through a narrow gateway in a high and not too carefully tended hedge. Beyond lay a rather frowzy path and many trees, set thickly together; and up the path he promenaded with Joseph Bush at his side.

"Is this—is this really happening?" he asked of Joseph.

"It's happening; but what is it?" Joe Bush asked.

"Lunatic!" Wilbur said tersely.

"Yes, or their constable."

"No properly regulated constable ever goes about without his badge," said young Mr. Fenn. "They'd never make a deaf man constable, anyway. Or possibly this loon isn't deaf at all and—"

"I wouldn't waste any flattering language," Joe whispered warningly. "He's got that gun all ready to shoot."

"Yes, that's why we're walking," said Mr. Fenn. "Can we make a break of it?"

"Not without getting killed," Joe said hastily. "Don't try it."

"Is getting killed any worse than letting Beatrice marry that snide?" Wilbur began wildly, permitting his hands to drop sufficiently to be waved.

"Put 'em up," came from behind him. "And keep 'em up. You fellows aren't going to make any getaway. We're all doing our share around here, and you two'll make eight I've sent to the county rockpile. March on, there!"

He poked, in the most convincing fashion, with his gun; they marched, breathing hard, yet obeying nicely.

And now, it appeared, the long walk through grown forest and untended undergrowth was taking them to the dark, square old house up there. A gloomy mansion it was, although of some pretensions; to Wilbur, in spite of all, it suggested the food thought, because people were living there. And once they could communicate with this unusual individual—

"Turn left, there!" came the command from behind. "Up that other path."

So it was not to be the house, after all. They were headed for the old-fashioned, painfully solid barn of other days, now remodeled into a garage and quite empty. There was a big door, with a tremendous padlock hanging to its hasp as it stood open, and a smaller door. There was one little window, with real iron bars; and they could see these things better now, because they had been marched straight into the place, and, keeping the gun trained on them in the deftest manner, the owner of the premises was getting ready to lock up.

He paused with the big doors open a bit.

"You two confounded hoboes are under arrest now—I made the arrest as a citizen, and I'll keep you here till our sheriff gets back to-night. I don't know just what you'll get if you stay there quiet, because that depends a good deal on how the judge feels. But I can tell you, sure and certain, that if you try getting out—which you can't do anyway—our sheriff 'll take measures he uses for unruly prisoners as soon as he gets here. And he doesn't wear any kid gloves during his working hours, either," the gentleman chuckled suddenly as he slammed the door.

Within the second, they heard the click of the heavy padlock. They heard the hard hand of the person as he rattled it to make sure that it had caught properly. They heard a satisfied grunt and then steps receded from their prison—so heavy as to walls and locks and bars, so utterly unsuspected as existing not five minutes ago!

Joe Bush's voice came through the shadowy stillness as a thin, strange sound:

"This time, Will, we're all—"

"Ready to get out and start south," the astonishing Wilbur finished for him.

"We don't get out of here," stated the camera-man.

"Well, d'ye think we're going to stay here and then be carted off to jail?"

"If I could think anything else—"

"Bite off that silly talk and say something useful," Mr. Fenn advised savagely, feverishly even. "Are there any tools in here?"

"Not that I can see. If we turn on the light—"

"We'll have that old fool out here with an ax," said Wilbur. "Let the light alone. No, there isn't so much as a tin can in the infernal hole."

Joe smiled gloomily.

"You can't cut through a two-inch plank with a tin can, anyway," he murmured. "This place was built when lumber was cheap; I saw that coming in, Will. He's got walls here that would do for a fort, and those doors would stand against a battering-ram."

Wilbur Fenn laughed, giving forth a harsh, bitter note.

"Are you tired or losing your nerve or —what?" he snapped. "What did I do with the knife that conductor lent me?"

"I think you put it in your pocket," the camera-man said mildly.

"I did. That's good. Three good blades, too," mused the eminent star. "Now, would you like to sit down and cry a while, Joseph, or will you be good enough to keep an eye out of that window while I carve the main entrance to shreds."

"If I keep an eye out of that window till you get the door carved to shreds, it 'll be covered with next winter's snow," said Mr. Bush. "Isn't there any way of tunneling under the side wall?"

"Not with a solid concrete floor turned up in a graceful curve where it meets the wood, Joe. You just watch and leave the rest to me. I'm going to trim around this hasp and take the whole thing out in a chunk."

He was wonderfully calm, but it was no normal, comfortable placidity. The quiet of despair, coupled with the determination to do murder if necessary, were in Wilbur Fenn. He opened the larger blade and went to work.

And, some ten minutes later, there came a loud snap and:

"Gone!"

"Blade?" ventured Joe Bush.

"Yep. It struck something even harder than the wood," said Wilbur as he fumbled at the next one.

"The wood's pretty hard itself, isn't it?"

"No harder than armor-plate," said Mr. Fenn. "It must be white ebony, if there is such a thing. Every time I try to drive in this knife it shaves off a little splinter smaller than a toothpick and then slips. And every time—oh, don't bother me."

The scraping sound went on, punctuated here and there by an impatient snarl. In the carriage-house the gloom thickened, too. Clouds had been piling up this last half-hour, and twilight was coming much earlier than usual. The picture star paused, dashed honest perspiration from his brow and ordered:

"Turn on one of those lights, anyway, Joe. I can't see a thing here."

"It's almost night outside, Will."

"And at nine—nine o'clock—" Wilbur whined. "Say! *Turn on the light!*"

"It must be cut off somewhere outside," Joe reported. "I've tried 'em all and not one lights up."

"Let 'em go to—blazes, then," puffed Mr. Fenn, as he went to work in the darkness with the second blade.

And—snap!

"That wasn't another blade?" Joe gasped.

"You guessed it the very first time," Wilbur Fenn said with difficulty. "They must be made of tin or—oh, Lord!"

"What?"

"Somebody's set a big steel plate in here to prevent just this stunt from either side," Wilbur reported, somewhat brokenly. "I can't see how they did it, or where it ends, but that's what I've smashed the two blades on."

"Does that—er—settle it?"

"No, but it delays things like sin. I've got to find my way around the plate and cut out the whole blasted thing, with one blade."

"Maybe the hinges—"

"They're probably shrunk into forged-steel sockets, somehow or other," Mr. Fenn panted. "I'll stick to this and get it loose."

The blade, small and impotent, scratched on and on. The darkness grew heavier by the minute, too, freezing the very soul of Wilbur Fenn as he worked. Without a watch, he could only guess—but it must be past seven o'clock now. And they were many miles from Philadelphia, and the wicked ceremony that might never be prevented now by—well, it should be prevented! That wedding should be stopped if Wilbur Fenn had to tear down the doors with his bare hands, and—

Snap!

"Will!" cried the camera-man.

"I — I came down too hard," choked Wilbur Fenn.

"Is it all broken?"

"Clean off, down to the handle, Joe," faltered the star. "That's the way they all broke. They're all gone now. They're gone and—"

"Well, let's see what is left of your knife," Joseph suggested, after a dreadful, strangling ten seconds.

"Eh?"

"I—just let me have it a minute," cried Joe Bush, and excitement crept into his tone. "I may be wrong, because I can't see anything, but I've been feeling around here and maybe—thanks."

He took from icy fingers the wreck of a once reliable pocket-knife, and Wilbur Fenn leaned against the wall and moaned. Some little time he fancied that his indomnitable spirit was breaking at last; fate herself seemed to have cast a blight upon the expedition. No sooner was one unthinkable problem solved than another popped into its place and mocked him; no sooner—

"Crickey," breathed Joe Bush.

"Cut yourself?" Wilbur muttered.

"Don't say a word to me. Don't move," hissed the camera-man. "Wait!"

The ruined knife was scratching over there, and scratching and scratching. Wilbur Fenn gave scant heed. Poor old Joe meant well, of course, and he was trying to do something or other. But there comes a time when hoping against hope is a mere waste of energy, and this was it.

And still—how strange that faint crackling of wood and that giggle of Joseph's. Wilbur crossed the black place with a jerk and:

"What is it?"

"What *is* it?" Joseph whispered ecstatically. "These bars are here to keep people out—not in. That's what it is! They run away down on the wall inside, and they're just screwed into the wood! I've got all but this last one loose and — oh, here!" said Joseph quite condescendingly. "The first one's off; just take hold of the other two, one by one, and give a tug!"

The dying thing within Wilbur leaped back to life. He seized a length of iron and pulled. It came free in his hand and he laid it upon the floor and seized another; and this too came free and was laid beside its brother as Joe breathed:

"Here comes the last one, Will. Who goes out first?"

"Lead the way, old man," Wilbur said, thickly and respectfully. "You've got all the brains in this company."

"Why, Will, I just happened to notice—"

"I forgive you, no matter how it happened," Mr. Fenn said feverishly. "Go on!"

Outside, the turf was soft and yielding; they landed upon it with never a sound and looked about swiftly. The house was over in that direction and hardly fifty yards distant, but the shades were drawn before the lighted windows, and there was no sign at all of the strange, deaf old man and his staggering revolver—which was really more than they had dared to hope.

Wilbur Fenn gripped his friend's arm so violently that the beloved camera was all but jarred from Joseph's grip, and started down beside the path, crouching, eyes feeling reasonably able to penetrate even the darkness, now that they were loose again. Crouching, too, Joseph ran with him. Now they had passed the house itself without challenge—and now they were tearing wildly along the grass beside the path, albeit no man pursued—and now, by all that was remarkable, they were in the road again and heading south, and there had been none to stay them.

A stout garage had failed as a prison; a sheriff had been cheated of two workers upon his rock-pile; and Wilbur Fenn was himself again, plus something new. He could not have defined it, and he had no time for self-analysis just then; but where before he had been merely hurrying to Philadelphia, he was *going* to Philadelphia now. With the hedge behind, they slowed down and merely trotted; and here Joe hazarded:

"You don't want to try another trolley, Will?"

"Nix," the star responded crisply. "I haven't got more than an hour now to make it, Joe. We'll hail a car and—do whatever lying's necessary once we get aboard."

"An automobile?"

"This one," said Wilbur, stepping boldly into the road and holding up his hand in the headlight glare.

As a pose, doubtless, it was a splendid imitation of the traffic officer, but Wilbur, unluckily, lacked certain other fittings of the road policeman. Not only were brass buttons absent, but virtually all other kinds as well. His coat was torn and his vest had been ripped open; his shirt was torn also, and his collar, although he did not know it, hung by a single buttonhole; and his hair was wild, and his face was dirty and nicely decorated now by a growth of beard that frequently defied two shaves per day.

So that the motor, whose occupant may have been an imaginative soul with a permanent mental picture of how a highwayman should look, merely roared as the hand went up, and gathering speed, shot down on him so suddenly that he no more than leaped from its path with a whole skin.

Yet, even leaping, the new Wilbur thought lucidly! And spinning about, he spun to some purpose, for with a frantic dive he bounced at the rear end of the car, and Joe Bush stood all alone in the black road, with a little red point shining through a dust cloud ahead.

Wilbur was on his way. Joe Bush heaved a great sigh.

"Good luck, old man," he called. "I hope you make the whole distance there."

"What?" came thickly through the dust cloud.

"Did you—did you fall, Will?" gasped the camera-man, racing forward toward the tottering figure that defined itself faintly in the night. "What's that around your neck?"

"That's his — his spare tire, and — and blast the man that 'll drive such a flimsy old rattletrap," Wilbur sputtered, as he cast a good thirty dollars' worth of automobile casing from him. "I had a grip on it like iron. I was going over the back to drive that car myself—and the rack busted!"

"Well, so long as your neck isn't broken, Will," Joe began faintly.

Wilbur snorted through the gloom.

"Say, my neck—get back there."

"What?"

"I'm going aboard this one if I have to jump the hood," Mr. Fenn announced as another pair of dazzling headlights swept down upon them.

"Don't try it, Will."

"Get back!" thundered the star.

And his commanding hand went up again —more commandingly this time, and with an expression upon his strained countenance which, looming up out of the night, might well have struck terror to the heart of a strong man.

Logically, the car should have stopped. Practically, in that tramp-infested section, the car acted precisely as had its predecessor. Again came the sudden roar of the motor, again the sudden bound forward of the lights. Again did Wilbur Fenn, cursing crazily, bounce from its path.

"No. It's a hold-up, and—" was all Joe Bush caught of the shout from the car.

And Wilbur had leaped at the rear of this one, and now, in good earnest, Wilbur was gone.

"Well, you got it that time, you poor, crazy kid," said Joseph shakily. "If you're not killed before—"

"Shut up!" came frenziedly through the dusty night.

"Will!" gasped the camera-man. "You didn't—again, I mean—you—that isn't *another* tire?"

"I don't know what they build these devilish things of, anyway," Wilbur Fenn snarled insanely, casting aside his newest specimen of fine rubber shoe. "I got that one fair and square, too, and it snapped off before I'd closed my fingers. But I'll get aboard a car that's built well enough to hold me if I have to stand here and jump on one after another till—"

"Hey!" cried Joe Bush in genuine alarm. "You quiet down. D'ye hear? Calm down."

"What?"

"You can't spend the night tearing spare tires off automobiles and piling them up here, Will," the camera-man said, very quietly and steadily. "Somebody'll send an officer back here and have you pinched, if you haven't broken your neck before that time. Stop that shaking."

"If you'd — if you'd dropped off two automobiles in three minutes—"

"Very likely I'd be shaking, but I'm not crazy enough to do it," the faithful friend went on. "Now, stand still and let me think."

Wilbur gulped convulsively.

"You get out and try to stop the next, Joe," he said, rather piteously. "Maybe there's something about the way I look at 'em that scares them. You try it, old man. Try to make this one stop."

"This isn't a car; it looks like a motor-cycle," Joe said, and even through the storm that enveloped his brain it seemed to Wilbur that there was something very odd about Joe's sudden smile—something uncanny, in fact, shivery. "Can you run a motor-cycle, Will?"

"Of course."

"Then I'll see if—you stand back, will you?"

Young Mr. Fenn tottered away dizzily, panting still. Joseph Bush stood in the road, yet he did not raise his hand. Rather, he seemed badly confused by the swift, single eye that whizzed toward him. He put up both hands as if blinded; he stepped to one side as the horn tooted sharply—and then changed his mind and stepped back—and changed it even again and returned.

And it happened.

The man aboard the motor-cycle, shouting, had done his best to slow down in time, but Joseph's confusion had nullified his every effort. Wilbur himself had not seen the actual smash very clearly, because of dust and the headlight suddenly turned the other way—but poor old Joe Bush had been hit and knocked out of the road!

And now, as the man on the motor-cycle stepped down, talking senselessly, and whirled the light about, he saw poor Joseph huddled down in a dusty little ball in the dry ditch beside the road. He was squirming in a ghastly fashion, as a man might squirm in his final agonies. He was turning over now, as if trying to get to his back—yes, and now he had turned and he had collapsed. From the ditch there came a single, awful groan that might well have caused the hair to stand on end and the heart to cease its beating.

The groan ended in a long, hissing expiration of breath—and utter stillness came upon the dark road again.

CHAPTER XVIII.

GUILEFUL GAIN.

AMONG the immediate results of the accident, the one that impressed him most during the first dreadful seconds was the steadying effect on Wilbur's frenzied self.

A moment ago he had been a lunatic, obsessed with the desire to leap aboard automobiles that were pointing toward Philadelphia. Now, as if an icy waterfall had been turned upon him, his head cleared. He was a clown—an idiot—a fevered fool! He had caused Joseph, the most faithful soul in the whole world, to give up his life for the simple stopping of a motor-cycle that would take him to Philadelphia.

And at least poor Joe had accomplished his purpose. The motor-cyclist was making no effort to escape; shaking visibly, he stood there with his headlight turned on the gruesome form, unable to move.

"I couldn't help it," he told the night, in shaking accents. "He dodged back and forth and—"

"You — you hit him," Wilbur Fenn managed to cry.

The unfortunate rider started violently;

his light switched about, too, and rested on the remarkable picture of Wilbur as he was just then.

"I didn't hit you, too?" he gasped.

"No, but you caught him," Mr. Fenn said. "He was a good—good friend of mine."

"But I haven't killed him," the unknown cried wildly. "I haven't—why, I didn't strike him hard enough to—come over here, will you, with me?"

He jerked his murderous machine about and wheeled it across the road and across the little sloping bank to the ditch, so that the light was turned full upon the shattered Joseph. Breathing in hysterical little gasps, he kicked down the idler, so that the motor-cycle stood alone, and dropped to his knees.

Breathing in gasps really very similar, Wilbur Fenn leaped the ditch and came to Joseph's other side, and quick, gentle hands turned over the ill-starred camera-man, so that his countenance was toward them. The eyes were closed tightly; the whole body was limp. Wilbur raised a hand and dropped it again; the hand fell sickeningly.

"Is he breathing?" Joe's friend asked.

The vibrating cyclist nerved himself and laid an ear to Joseph's chest.

"Just!" he reported.

"Do you—have you any idea just where you hit him?"

"No, but I must have done it squarely, to curl the poor chap up like this," the rider said, with difficulty. "Do you know anything about first aid?"

"I know something about it, but we've got nothing to work with. If we put him up here on the grass, perhaps we can do something."

It was a bitter job, too, this lifting of the limp and all but lifeless Joe Bush. Every touch of him cut Wilbur Fenn to the quick and set him to cursing himself silently. And now old Joe was stretched out and the rider, wheeling the light nearer, seemed to have regained some sort of self-command.

"I can find broken bones and make some sort of setting for them," he said. "I know that much, at least, and I've got three or four clean handkerchiefs, so that we can put on emergency dressings of a sort, if he's cut. We'll have to get some of these clothes off first."

"I'll get his—" Wilbur began.

Joseph groaned—softly, horribly, but unquestionably. Further, with a violent quiver, Joseph opened his eyes; after which he groaned again.

"Will!" he said faintly.

"I'm right here, old man," Mr. Fenn replied.

"Was I—was I hit?"

"I hit you, old chap," the rider confessed. "I don't know how it came to happen, because I had almost stopped, but—we can determine all that later. We're going to fix you up now as well as we can before a doctor gets here."

Joseph groaned again, hideously this time.

"No," he protested weakly. "No."

"We'll have to find out just what happened to you, Joe," Wilbur said firmly. "Then we'll get a doctor and—"

"No," gulped the camera-man. "You go on, Will. You go ahead. I'm—all right."

"Don't you worry about me," Wilbur said briefly. "Now, just let us get your coat and shirt off and—"

"No!" said the unruly Joseph, who seemed to have a more positive character when injured than when whole. "Lemme alone. Lemme alone or I'll—I'll fight you off and get myself worse smashed than I am."

"But—"

"Let me get up," pursued the camera-man, and tried it and sank back with a shriek of agony. "Help me up. I won't have any amateur doctors tinkering me, Will. D'ye hear? Let me get up and take me to a doctor or a hospital."

"You couldn't very well get there on a motor-cycle, old chap," its owner said, kindly.

"I can—walk there, if—you'll help me—up," Joe gasped.

"Well?" asked the rider.

"I suppose we can try it," Wilbur Fenn said dubiously, as he placed a hand under Joseph Bush's arm. "Are you ready? All right, then; lift."

He himself lifted, gently and powerfully. The motor-cyclist, his face white, also lifted. And thus, in the white glare of the headlight, the wreck of Joe Bush was stood upon its feet.

It smiled dizzily. It swayed against Wilbur Fenn.

" My—my legs aren't broken," it said thankfully. " But I—feel so queer inside! I—oh! oh!"

" Injured internally," the rider muttered.

Joseph collapsed altogether against his friend.

" Get me to a doctor, Will," he begged.

" Can you take him on the motor-cycle?" its owner asked. " Or had I better try it?"

" I can run the thing, so far as that goes," said Mr. Fenn. " But maybe you'd better—"

" No," said Joseph Bush, with weak fierceness. " I'll die here before I'll let that crazy guy take me. It's people like him that kill everybody that has to walk on the roads. It's loony drivers like him—"

" Well, don't get excited. Your friend's going to take you," the culprit interrupted soothingly. " There's a back seat here and it's wide and comfortable for any ordinary purposes. Do you suppose you're able to hang on to your friend?"

" Yes," Joe Bush snapped bitterly.

Wilbur Fenn, head shaking literally and figuratively, was pushing the motor-cycle back to the road and feeling over it. It was of a popular make, luckily, and he knew the controls quite well. He slid into the saddle and started the motor—and behind him the late rider was purring to Joe Bush:

" There, old man. Can you walk? Of course you can. That's it."

" It's—inside of me—" explained the camera-man.

" I know, but maybe it isn't so bad, after all. Here's the saddle. Can you climb in, if I lift?"

There was a little struggle behind.

" I'm in," Joe reported. " And—wait, Will. Don't start. Where's my camera?"

" Is this it?" asked the rider, picking up the beloved box. " You can't carry that."

" He'd keep that if he was dying," Wilbur Fenn explained. " Got hold of me, Joe?"

" Go ahead."

" Go straight on to Willsburg — three miles," the owner of the motor-cycle directed. " That's where I live. Ask your way to Dr. Dunham and tell him to do everything possible and charge it to me—T. G. Phelps. I'll walk and we can settle the damage question later on."

" And if I—I don't make you pay for this," Joe Bush shrilled irresponsibly.

The motor-cycle started, slowly and very carefully. The motor-cycle rolled on, also slowly, although a great deal faster than a man walks. The motor-cycle, in fact, rolled on for the best part of a quarter-mile, while Wilbur Fenn thought hard and sadly and his old friend sagged against his back, clinging weakly.

And then the old friend's grip relaxed and in a voice that belonged to the normal Joe Bush Wilbur heard:

" Let her out, kid. I guess it's all right now."

" What?" gasped Wilbur.

" Let her out. We've made two turns now; he can't see us."

" You're not hurt?" young Mr. Fenn cried delightedly.

" He never touched me, of course; I never let him. Weren't you on?" Joe Bush demanded, with at least equal wonder. " Well, let her out, anyway, Will."

" Did you think that all out in a second and stage that death-scene for the purpose of getting this motor-cycle, Joe?" Wilbur asked, breathlessly.

" Do you suppose I did it for practise?" Joe said impatiently. " Let her out!"

" Well, there have been times, Joseph, when I considered you a slow thinker. But I humbly beg your pardon," said Mr. Finn. " Hang on."

Could the worried gentleman on foot behind them have seen, he must have speculated actively. For where his vehicle had been rolling at an almost wobbly speed an instant back, it bounced forward as if shot from a cannon. And bounced again and mercifully held together under the shock of too much power applied too suddenly—

and then settled down into as delightful a pace as its present driver had ever experienced.

The thing was not merely making time; it seemed to have caught the infection and gone mad. Accustomed to rapid going in the little red roadster which Lester had taken so unceremoniously, Wilbur Fenn estimated that they were making fifty miles an hour — ah, yes, and with everything wide open they seemed to be doing rather better than sixty now.

There was a horn, and Wilbur laid his hand upon its button and kept it there. There were other vehicles, but they really did not count at all. They had the strangest trick of coming instantaneously out of the black night—showing themselves as a pair of rear wheels, usually drawing to the right-hand side of the road — showing themselves as a flash of headlight in the road—and then ceasing to exist. There were other vehicles, with lights that blinded Mr. Fenn for a moment and then were gone again.

There were towns, too, where he was forced to slow down, but they mattered very little indeed. The great and glorious consideration was that he had found the road, traveled quite frequently in the red roadster these last weeks, that led straight into Philadelphia and that under him was what seemed to be a perfect motor-cycle.

Now he feared that, following all precedent of that day, it would go up in a flash and a cloud of smoke. It did not. Again, it seemed certain that they would hit this or that car ahead—and they did not. And now, with eight o'clock a long way behind and nine coming nearer every second, the lights of the big city itself were just ahead—and since he must soon cut down to a very moderate pace, Wilbur Fenn indulged in the final burst of speed.

And he was there!

Yes, after all the struggle, he was in Philadelphia and he knew the way about. He made for quiet streets and opened up the throttle wherever the risk of arrest seemed slight; threaded sedately along for a block or two where lights were bright and officers frequent; whizzed wildly through another quiet section, conscious that the last big clock had been at exactly eight forty-five as they passed.

And here, at last, was the still, wealthy thoroughfare blessed with Beatrice Morrow's presence through all the years since her birth. Two more squares and they would be within yards of the house itself. Wilbur Fenn, choking oddly, slowed down and stopped at the corner—for there, just ahead, a long canopy stretched from the doorway of the Morrow home to the curb and there were glistening automobiles and stately old-fashioned carriages at either side of the way.

Joe Bush chuckled excitedly.

"Are you going in like this?" he asked. "Looking as you do and—"

"I'm going in there so fast and I'm going to hit Henry Tolliver so hard and so suddenly that he'll never what happened!" young Mr. Fenn replied, as he leaped from the faithful steel steed. "I—"

"Psst!" said Joseph Bush.

Very obviously, they were being approached. A keen-faced, polite-appearing person in afternoon dress was walking swiftly toward them from the direction of the canopy. He paused and squinted, as if unable to believe his eyes; and then he came directly to them and said very softly:

"Pardon me, but is this — er — Mr. Fenn?"

"This is what's left of him," said the star. "Get out of the way."

"Just a minute, old chap," the other pleaded, energetically. "Don't rush in like that and wreck everything. Jennison sent me here."

"Jennison?"

"Naturally. Where under the sun have you been and what happened to you, sir? Jennison had given you up altogether."

"Is he down here?"

"Yes."

"Has he—he stopped that wedding?"

"He has a plan of some sort, although I don't know what, and you figure in it, although I don't know how," the stranger smiled, quickly. "Mr. Jennison didn't honor me with the full particulars, but he gave me most explicit orders for getting you into the house."

"Eh?"

"You had no idea of trying to force an entrance in this condition?" grinned the other, glancing back keenly. "Tolliver has two men there in footmen's rigging, even—and it couldn't be done. Come, please."

"Where?"

"Into the house, of course. I believe that Mr. Jennison has bribed half the servants and—see here, sir. Do you want that wedding to go through on schedule? Then come and do your proper share in wrecking it."

Whoever he might be, his voice was very sharp. Wilbur Feen, with faithful Joseph at his heels, permitted his arm to be taken: and with another glance at the brilliant entrance the stranger led them straight down the side-street, stopped short at the little latticed gateway, chuckled and opened it with a key, and they were in Merwin Morrow's own old-fashioned back garden.

"Brick path. Step very lightly," hissed the guide. "That's the idea. Down this way."

There were side windows to the huge place; they glowed, to the last one, with soft light. Also, they raised a great prayer of thanks in young Mr. Fenn's heart, for he was there and, whatever had happened to Jennison earlier in the day, Jennison was busy now.

Their guide knew his way perfectly. Here was a little side door at the rear of the ground floor, approximately under the big library in the extension: it was open and waiting and beyond it lay a long, faintly illuminated little corridor, through which the pilot also briskly made his way.

"This way, now. I'm to leave you here and report."

He opened a door and waved them on. They entered, walking into darkness—and the door closed with a slam!

"Say—you!" young Mr. Fenn called.

Through the heavy door came the sound of stifled laughter. And then, because the keyhole was big and old-fashioned as the rest of the place, words came to them quite clearly:

"Listen, gentlemen. Can you hear me perfectly?"

"*Hey?*" responded the suddenly cracked voice of Joe Bush.

"Evidently you can," pursued the gentleman without. "You're down under the old part of the house now, gentlemen, and you're at liberty to yell yourselves hoarse, if you like. Nobody can possibly hear you, with all that's going on above. Just the same, we don't care to take chances. Are your noses good?"

"Open that door or—" Wilbur began senselessly.

"Wait a moment. There! Can you smell that?" asked the fiend beyond the door.

A cold spurt struck Wilbur Fenn's hand. And a cold chill struck Wilbur Fenn's heart—for that was chloroform!

"That was a very nice dramatic gasp," the one without said, pleasantly. "Now, there's no need of your suffering an unnecessary headache later, *but*—I've got a quart can of that out here and a funnel with a crooked nose, and just as soon as you begin to howl or thrash about, in goes the whole quart through the keyhole. Mr. Tolliver has a doctor here, in case this very thing happened, so that you'll be hauled out and revived at the proper time. Will that hold you? I think so!" said the unseen gentleman, and they could hear him straightening up and chuckling again.

And then, as they stood there in the pitchy gloom, there came a sound of string music, from some higher region of the big house.

It was soft, beautiful music, yet it bade fair to slaughter Wilbur on the spot, for the tune they played up there was the Mendelssohn "Wedding March."

CHAPTER XIX.

ALL AT ONCE.

INTO the impenetrable blackness of their prison came a fearful calm, as the ghastly music percolated through thick, old walls and floors.

"Will," said Joe Bush, brokenly. "Poor old Will."

"What? Drop that stuff," snarled the eminent star, viciously. "When I can fall for a thing like *this*, I don't need any sympathy—I don't deserve any. How in blazes

I ever came to make more than five dollars a week passes me, Joe. Brains never did it. When we're out of this I'm going to have my skull opened and washed out with gasoline. So long as there's no brain there, it might better be clean than choked up with—"

"Anybody'd have done what we did," Joe protested softly. "Don't let that fellow have the satisfaction of hearing you."

"All right. I won't," muttered Wilbur, bitterly.

For another period of seconds the silence gripped them, while further bars of the dread music floated down. Unless an apparently capable string orchestra had chosen to rehearse up there, the ceremony was even now under way which would rob him of Beatrice forever; and the quiet that came upon Wilbur was as no other quiet that he had ever known. In the gloom, a long, trembling breath escaped him.

"Well, he's thorough, anyway," he muttered. "He must have spent forty or fifty thousand dollars by this time, and he covered every last point I was likely to attack, Joe. He gives me credit for a lot of punch, too. Maybe he's right. Maybe we needn't lie down and die even now. Feel around these walls and see if there isn't any other way out. You start that way; I'll go this."

Hands out, he was off, and very softly he could hear Joseph Bush fumbling along the opposite wall.

Hope, be it admitted, did not rise in his heart; there seemed no longer room for doubt that Miss Morrow, at that minute, was in the very act of becoming Mrs. Henry Tolliver. Five or six, or possibly ten minutes hence, the ceremony would be over—yet what may not happen in five minutes? A giant shell, which may be killing a hundred men, takes only seconds to travel miles and explode; the tornado, sweeping over a city, may decimate its population in five minutes.

Not that Wilbur Fenn considered himself either a giant shell or a tornado, of course, but that wedding march above was having an effect he had never experienced before. His eyes seemed able to see boarded windows even before his incredibly delicate fingers traveled over the boards; tiny rough spots on the wall magnified themselves to lumps as big as a walnut; he found an electric socket, with no bulb therein; he found long, uneven lines, with rough holes here and there, which indicated that shelves had been nailed to the wall at one time.

He had never investigated the lower regions of Merwin Morrow's home, to be sure, yet a sixth sense told him exactly where they were. This, at a guess, was the old butler's pantry, abandoned since the house had been remodeled to more modern ideas. Perhaps the windows had been nailed up tight for some other purpose; perhaps the work had been done today for his especial benefit, at any rate—he bumped softly into Joe Bush.

"Any way out?" he breathed.

"One window over there, but they've got a lot of inch plank fastened over it. What's this?"

"Eh?" Wilbur's fingers swept the space between them. "Dumbwaiter door, Joe."

"Locked, too," the camera-man submitted.

Four sets of fingers worked on, feeling, feeling, feeling.

"How about these hinges?" Wilbur asked. "Two pins on the door that drop into two sockets on the wall?"

"Yes, but it's a tight fit, Will, and anyway—"

"The whole thing moves up and down, quarter of an inch," the unfortunate Mr. Fenn hissed. "Where's the wreck of that knife? Got it, Joe? Open the stump of that big blade and give it to me, will you?"

He reached feverishly for it and gripped it; in a way, he suspected that he was going mad, for the door really seemed loose to the touch, whereas Henry Tolliver's superhuman agents never would have permitted such a thing to remain. And still, as he pried the stub of steel between the two parts, the door certainly rose easily, creaked a little, paused—

"I've got my fingers under the bottom of it," Joe Bush gasped.

"Then lift, easy. Lift!"

He pried anew. Together, they stifled a gasp—for the light steel door had come clear of its hinges and, toppling toward them, all but crashed to the floor. They seized it and lowered it tenderly to the linoleum. Young Mr. Fenn, into whose eyes the perspiration of pure excitement was running, reached out to find the rope and encountered only smooth walls. He felt on and encountered the hands of Joe Bush.

And above, decidedly clearer and sharper now, the finale of the wedding march came down to them.

" I can go up there barefoot," Joe Bush announced.

" So can I, but—"

" Listen, Wilbur," said the camera-man. " You let me go first. I've got an idea and—"

" What is it?"

" I can't stop to tell you, but I'll guarantee that it busts up that ceremony," panted Joseph. " You come after me and snatch the girl."

" If she'll be snatched and I'm not shot," escaped Mr. Fenn.

" Will, excuse my asking such a question, but did—did she really love you?"

" She certainly did, Joe," Wilbur murmured.

" Then she loves you just as much now," concluded the camera-man, and his body brushed softly as it passed into the shaft.

Young Mr. Fenn, after seconds of lightning thought, would have stayed him and led the way to whatever might lie above—and that, incidentally, was probably a fall down the shaft and a broken neck, for the walls were like glass—but it was too late now. Joseph was climbing and panting; Joseph was up now, out of reach. Wilbur Fenn, who really seemed to have no idea of how a gentleman should dress for a wedding, gently kicked off his own shoes. Soundlessly, he tiptoed over to the door, where a man was chuckling. Soundlessly, he felt his way back to the little shaft—and Joe Bush was still panting, although all of ten feet above.

And there was a sudden squeak and crackling of thin board, and it seemed that Joe had forced the door on the upper floor. Wilbur Fenn drew himself up, felt about for a hold that did not exist, shut his teeth and, with bare hands and bare feet, climbed as Joseph had done.

It was an insane, heartbreaking task and one that never could have been accomplished had the shaft been six inches wider. It consisted in bracing hard with hand and feet and hitching upward, two inches at best—in bracing again and hitching upward again—in doing the same thing over and over and over, yet always coming nearer to that rectangle of faint light up above.

And now he could reach out and grip the sill over which Joe had already passed. Wilbur Fenn did it and, with an exhausted gasp, drew himself into an upper room and, pushing back his damp hair, looked about.

At one time, perhaps, it had been the Morrow dining-room; there was only a covered billiard-table in here now, with cues and racks on the walls and a line of counters overhead. And there was an open door over there, through which the light was streaming and, despite all his desire for a headlong rush, the sight revealed beyond that door held Wilbur frozen for a moment.

The marriage ceremony was actually being read.

Before the robed clergyman, in the wonderful bower of roses, stood Henry Tolliver, erect, serene, and consciously worthy, and Beatrice Morrow—and Beatrice was not happy!

Wilbur knew his Beatrice, few though the months since his first sight of her; he knew her every curve of lip, her every glance of eye, her every shade of coloring, and she was unhappy now. There was a bright red spot on either cheek, that might have been mistaken for the blush of a happy bride by one who knew her less well; to the rigid Wilbur it signified only high nervous tension. And her mouth, which had been downright grim a second back, was trembling slightly now; and her eyes, as she looked up suddenly at the minister, seemed to be imploring him to go no further.

All these things Wilbur saw in a single flash, and the same flash included a maze of perfectly dressed guests in the drawing-room beyond the bower. Several of the guests, it seemed to him, were big men of a somewhat familiar type and—the second flash was imprinting itself upon his tired brain and this flash consisted almost altogether of Joe Bush.

Joseph had arrived and the ceremony had stopped.

Joseph seemed to have wended his swift way behind palms and then exploded, as it were, directly beside the pair. At any rate, dirty, bareheaded and bare-footed, torn, wild-eyed and with hair pointing in a dozen directions, he was there. Yes, and he was pointing a finger at Henry Tolliver and, without the loss of one priceless second, he was shouting:

"Stop!"

Two big men, having started visibly, began detaching themselves quickly from the select, assembled company. They were coming forward and Joe Bush saw them.

"Don't let her marry that hound," he shouted. "I'm only a poor devil, but I fought my way here to stop this crime." The big men were quite near, but Joseph had apparently forgotten them for the time. His soiled forefinger pointed at Henry Tolliver and he screamed:

"I had a sister once—a pretty, innocent young—"

And that was the end of Joseph's speech.

The two big men had reached him at the same instant. One of them had clapped a large hand over Joe Bush's mouth and slipped the other under his right arm. The other, hesitating for a second about knocking Joe Bush out on the spot, ended by slipping his hand under Joseph's left arm—and they lifted, raising the struggling camera-man three inches from the floor, and a little side door opened magically behind the palms and they passed through.

Joseph was gone.

Merwin Morrow, just beside the lovely bride, had turned white and then red.

"Henry, did that—" Wilbur caught, while Beatrice looked about wildly.

"You understand perfectly," Henry Tolliver said, in a sharp undertone—but he flushed, too, as he faced the minister again and nodded; and Merwin Morrow, really rosy now, looked oddly at the back of his sleek, well-formed head.

Wilbur took a step forward. It should have been a run, but it was only a step, because, to tell the truth, Joe Bush had stolen the very idea that Wilbur himself had meant to use as a means of halting the ceremony. Now, it seemed, he would have to think up another thunderbolt and—what was the strange rustling, there at the back of the company?

People were surging about curiously, as if to permit somebody's passing. Ah, yes, and somebody was rushing through, quite cyclonically, and now the somebody was in the little aisle and coming directly toward the interesting couple, a rolled paper in her hand and the sorrows and the furies of the world in her wonderful eyes.

And whatever she might be doing there, the somebody was Violet Wayne!

To Wilbur's eyes, the little wretch had never looked prettier or more amazing than at that second, as she reached the astounded group before the clergyman. Beatrice, turning, shrank. Henry Tolliver, who had just completed one blush, colored to the very roots of his hair, for no matter how perfect one's poise a guilty conscience is a bad thing to carry to one's wedding.

And now Violet had thrust her paper at Beatrice Morrow and she was choking:

"Stop! Don't marry him! Read that please and—"

"Miss—Miss Wayne!" Henry Tolliver managed.

Two more big men were detaching themselves. Wilbur Fenn stood rigid again; a little voice inside whispered that it were, perhaps, as well to lend Violet no assistance just now.

Violet was looking Henry Tolliver up and down; scorn was in her gaze and bitterness, love, hate and an assortment of other emotions.

"You!" said Miss Wayne, reaching dramatically into the low-cut neck of her simple gown. "You thing! Here! Here is the money you paid me to be silent! I won't take it—do you hear? And I will not be silent and see this girl sacrificed to—to you!"

And here, unaware that the big men were coming nearer with her every breath, Miss Wayne threw out her arms hysterically.

"That," she cried thrillingly, "is the man who made me what I am to-day! That beast in human shape—"

And Violet, too, had run her little course.

The pair of large gentlemen had reached Miss Wayne's side and, exactly as had been the case with the departed Joseph, a hand went over her mouth and she was lifted from the floor. What looked like a retired, old-school policeman, albeit he wore a footman's livery, was holding open the little side door and waiting grimly for them to lug Miss Wayne through and, presumably, cast her down the mystic chute that swallowed all objectors to this wedding.

But Violet's slim hands could scratch, if they could not drag away the large fingers of her captor. Violet scratched and the hand came loose for an instant — and through the place rang her scream of:

"Justice! I demand justice or—"

That was all. The door and the hand closed upon Violet just there and she had passed out of the situation.

Yet not without leaving her distinct impression! Merwin Morrow's countenance was white and savage again, and even above the sound of many people moving excitedly, Wilbur caught:

"Who was that woman?"

"An actress, sir, and the merest acquaintance," Henry Tolliver said, with difficulty. "I give you my word of honor on that point. Later, I shall be glad to explain everything, but just now I beg that you will allow Dr. Amsford to—"

"Well, Mr. Tolliver, if I may be permitted to ask a question or two before proceeding with the ceremony?" suggested the clergyman, who was a square-jawed young man, with humorous lines that did not weaken his strong face in any degree.

"Amsford!" pleaded Tolliver. "I—"

He was permited to go no further.

Out at the edge of the gathering, toward the street entrance, there was still another stir taking place—a more pronounced commotion this time because it seemed to involve more people. Wilbur, coming all unseen into the doorway, started at the sight of John Jennison himself, striding forward with a slim, blond girl on his arm—started again and wondered at the sight of the tall lady in black behind Jennison and of the short, plump girl who wept!

Who were they? Why were they here? Why was Jennison here, for that matter, after the trick he had played this afternoon? Wilbur Fenn, incredible figure that he was, padded into the room in his bare feet as Jennison called:

"Has this ceremony taken place?"

"Not as yet," said the clergyman, who was really the only calm person present.

"It will not take place," thundered the lawyer. "Thank Heaven we've reached here in time."

"You are—you are—" Merwin Morrow cried.

"I'm a man who goes out of his way, now and then, to prevent a wrong!" John Jennison shouted. "These unfortunate women retained my services, some time ago, in the matter of Henry Tolliver. I'm glad to have brought them into Philadelphia and into this house at the right moment." And now he laughed and indicated the girl on his arm. "Sir, Mrs. Henry Tolliver, the third."

"*What?*" shrieked Henry himself.

"Not one word from you, sir!" Jennison cried. "This is the innocent girl you married in Chicago, not one year ago. And here," he pursued, drawing forward the plump young woman, "is Mrs. Henry Tolliver, the second, whom you married in Los Angeles in nineteen fourteen. And *here* is the one and only true Mrs. Henry Tolliver, married to you in the license clerk's office at Detroit, Michigan, on May sixteenth, nineteen ten and abandoned by you one year later."

Henry Tolliver, for the second, could not part his lips. As one, the three latest comers burst into sudden weeping; and the blond girl came forward with outstretched hands and wailed:

"Henry! Henry! How could you do it? How could you? How *could* you?"

"I—I—never! I swear that—" Henry Tolliver began.

"Stop!" commanded Mr. Morrow. "And bring back that girl, please, and the man who was taken out before her. You'll never marry my daughter, Tolliver, but by the mighty—"

The turmoil of fifty voices engulfed his own as he strode toward the little door behind the palms.

"Bee," Wilbur Fenn cried, softly. "Bee!"

And although the dirt was caked upon him and matted into his hair, although he had neither collar, shoes nor much of anything else in the way of conventional clothing, the rescued Miss Morrow, coming out of what had seemed to be a trance, whirled toward him and leaped to his arms with a great, glad cry of:

"Oh, Will, Will!"

Joseph Bush, tired, but nicely cleaned and dressed again, was flattered without being flustered. Richard Lester had sent for him within thirty seconds of his appearance at the Pinnacle studio and now he had been telling facts to Richard Lester for twenty minutes at least, while the latter listened almost respectfully.

Why Coburn, head of the scenario department, should have been sent for, to sit over there in the corner, he had not quite grasped as yet—which was largely because Joseph was so deeply absorbed in his own story.

"And now, about his contract, sir," he said, "of course Mr. Fenn didn't ask me to ask you about that—"

Richard Lester, these last few hours, had had the very shock of his life. For a considerable time he had fancied that Wilbur was gone from this world and that his heirs and assigns would collect just about everything the Pinnacle owned. Later, hints of Wilbur's continued existence had floated in, growing stronger with the hours, reaching final, full confirmation in this recital of Joe Bush's. Lester was no man to pass lightly over a breach of contract—but at the same time a spirit of Christian forbearance had sprouted in his heart, and it had melted somewhat. So he frowned at his cigar and said:

"Is he willing to come right back and go on, Bush?"

"He hopes to, in two days at most. That's all the honeymoon he asks."

"Got some good film there, Bush?"

"Why, I've got him fighting and jumping on a freight-train—that's great stuff! I've got him doing circus stunts, and I took a few feet of him when he was making the deal with the circus boss. I've got him being thrown off a car—and that was some fight. I've got Miss Wayne kissing him and all that stuff and Miss Wayne jumping on the train and—"

"Pretty near a whole story in itself, eh?" Lester mused.

"Well, with about ten times as many more scenes written in, of course."

Lester glanced at his scenario man and back at Joe Bush.

"Go ahead," he ordered. "I guess there'll be no trouble at this end about his contract."

"Well, it seems that this Tolliver hired one detective agency and then hired another to do some investigating and find more weak spots in Mr. Fenn's position," the camera-man said eagerly. "They looked up everything, and they even found out the deal he made with his lawyer, Mr. Jennison. They bought up a clerk named Quinn, and paid him two thousand dollars, so that if Mr. Fenn did wire in for any more money, Quinn could catch the message and refuse in Mr. Jennison's name. Mr. Fenn had quite a little argument with Jennison, late last night, before he learned the truth—but he was too grateful to Jennison to make any trouble."

"And that fellow really took down three women and passed them off as other Mrs. Tollivers, eh?" Lester chuckled.

"Why, he saw the notice in one of the early afternoon editions and knew it was up to him to do something strenuous if Wilbur wasn't able to stop the ceremony—yes," grinned the faithful camera-man. "So he got these three ladies from a dramatic agency and coached them on the way down—and I must say they were good. Why, that one lady in the black dress cried so when it came her turn to put her arm around Tolliver's neck that I almost thought it was real myself. She just sobbed all over Tolliver and begged him to come back to her and the children, and poor old Tolliver almost fainted. There at the last, he was so badly mixed up that he didn't know Mr. Morrow was cursing him for the worst hound that ever walked. Why, those three girls did so fine that they never asked either me or Violet to give an account of our experiences."

"Vi came up pretty strong, eh?" Coburn broke in.

"She certainly looked like a girl with a grievance," said Joseph. "You know, she saw that Tolliver was getting married last night, just as she got back here after stealing the confession from Mr. Fenn—and it was too much for her conscience. It seems that Tolliver's detectives offered her another five thousand if she'd get it back, but it was only luck after all, because she really had an aunt down there. It was screamingly funny to see Wilbur thanking her, after all.

"She just shook hands with him and told him she wasn't in love with him and never could be; and she said that she'd been saving up for a chicken farm these last two years and the ten thousand would have fixed her up—but when it came to a showdown, between cheating Wilbur out of his girl and losing the money, she let the money slide. She said she hadn't much conscience, but she'd never figured on the wedding being rushed through like that. She said that, with a week to work in, Will could have won out alone."

"And so, after all these thrilling preliminaries, they were married on the spot," Lester reflected.

"Well, not just on that spot," the camera-man corrected. "You see, it was pretty noisy and excited in there about that time, but Miss Morrow and Wilbur—Lord, what a sight he was!—insisted on being married before anything else happened and her father was too weak by the time to protest. The minister — and there's another sport — asked some questions and looked at Will and Miss Morrow, clinging to each other as if they'd never part again, and he said that so far as he could see the best thing was to take a couple of witnesses into the billiard-room and get it over then and there. Say, I'll bet no bridegroom ever looked like Wilbur before last night. I can see him standing there, looking as if he'd gone through a sausage machine, with little Vi standing behind Miss Morrow and—"

"Maid of honor, eh?"

"She was the only bridesmaid, sir; the regular ones were up-stairs having hysterics about that time," Joseph explained. "I'll bet those two girls are friends for life, too! The way they hugged and kissed each other, after the ceremony, with Wilbur grinning over at the side and picking chunks of grass out of his hair! On the level, I never—ha! ha! ha!"

Lester puffed three blue rings of smoke, removed his cigar, and glanced inquiringly at Coburn.

"Nothing there that can't be reproduced, is there?"

"We'd have to put another girl in place of the present Mrs. Fenn, of course."

"Naturally, and we'll have to tangle up the incidents and get 'em far enough from the real facts so that Fenn'll stand for it. But the main idea, Coburn?"

"Oh, it 'll make a bear of a picture, with Bush's stuff."

"We could do it as soon as we finish 'Daring and Dynamite.'"

"Perfectly."

"And he'll be back from his honeymoon then and in a good humor," Lester mused pleasantly. "Yes, we'll do it for the next feature and — oh, Bush! Will there be about ten dozen lawsuits between Fenn and Tolliver, for the things they did to each other?"

Joe Bush shook his head emphatically and replied:

"Absolutely not," he cried. "They shook hands last night and Tolliver—he was pretty badly cut up about it, too—admitted that he was licked. There'll be no suits to bother Wilbur, Mr. Lester. 'Anything goes' and no come-backs, you know; that was their original agreement."

"'Anything Goes!'" Lester repeated. "That's just exactly what we'll call it, Coburn."

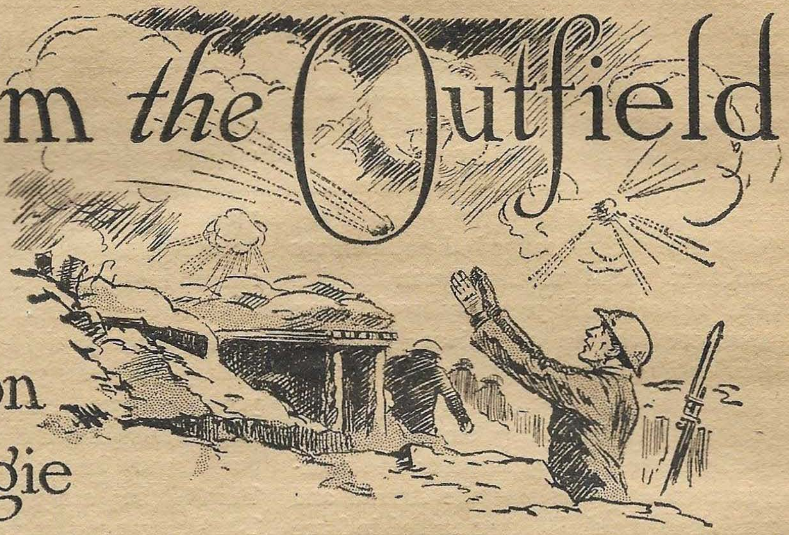
"Could we call it anything else?" chuckled the scenario man.

"'Anything Goes!'" muttered the head of Pinnacle Picture, Inc. "Well—tell us the rest, Bush."

(The End.)

From the Outfield

by Hamilton Craigie



It was the last half of the ninth. The home team, fighting desperately for every advantage, had managed to fill the bases with only one out; and with two of their mightiest sluggers coming up, the rally seemed about to culminate in a belated victory.

It appeared as if the " break " had arrived; the psychological moment when the tension of a hard-fought game snaps suddenly in a jumble of errors or in a flurry of base-hits.

As the next batsman, swinging a heavy black bat like a *papier-mâché* toy, approached the plate, an audible sigh arose from the stands and swelled into a short, sharp, barking roar as the first ball, curving in an abrupt arc with the speed of light, flashed over the plate and thudded into the catcher's glove for the first strike.

Remote on his mound, silent in the midst of a vast well of pandemonium, the pitcher seemed the incarnation of unhurried grace. Seemingly he was unmindful of the roar of the stands, the runners straining on the base-lines, the menacing figure of the batter, as he delivered the next ball.

Crash! There was a dull impact of wood against leather as the ball, a streak of gray, shot like a bullet on a line over third base, a bare ten feet in air.

At the crack of the bat the runners on first and second were in motion; but the man at third base, hugging the bag, shot a glance over his shoulder at the figure of the left fielder, who, with the swing of the bat, dashed forward to meet what appeared to be a safe hit.

The rules of the game held the runner at third against a possible catch, after which he would be compelled to touch the bag before attempting to score.

He did not believe the ball would be caught; but he continued to look over his shoulder as the left fielder, lunging forward in a last desperate effort, plucked the ball out of the air with his bare hand, and, with no appreciable interval of motion, hurled it in a long, sweeping parabola toward the home plate.

Then it became a race between the ball and the runner. It had been a marvelous catch and a wonderful recovery, but the runner was swift and the throw was a long one.

He would make it, he told himself.

As he neared the plate a tremendous, crashing roar burst like the broadside of a field battery.

He plunged forward in a long, diving slide; and came up in a cloud of dust as the catcher, standing four-square like a tower, met him with the ball for the final out.

The Ninety-Sixth New York had just taken the trench, which was really nothing but a succession of shell-craters, when the enemy's barrage burst over and around them in a series of heavy " crumps " from his five-point-nines and Big Berthas.

Men burrowed like moles in the tumbled earth. At intervals the high, gobbling note of a great shell changed to a sudden, sharp whistling. Then would come a thud as it buried its nose in the broken soil, to explode with an earth-shaking crash and a tremendous upheaval of destruction and ruin.

They knew that beyond them, perhaps a score of yards at most, was another trench, out of which presently would come a counter-attack in a furious flurry of bombs and rifle-fire, when the enemy's artillery lifted its barrage.

Just now, however, they continued to endure the nerve-shaking inaction; the racking interval of waiting; while around and among them the shell-bursts roared in huge fountains of mud and débris.

Along their thin, irregular line the drumfire played with an increasing intensity, so that it seemed that they were helpless in the midst of an inferno of noise, which, by its very clamor, would beat them into the ooze in which they lay; would flatten them into the earth as by a ponderous, brazen hammer of sound.

They were new to war—modern war, which they had never invested with a tithe of the grim horror of which they were at last a part—but in their silent endurance was seen the steady flame of a courage which had been tested in other fires burning brightly in the midst of the devilish pandemonium of death which hedged them round and at intervals took its toll of their lessening numbers.

Presently there came a lull—an almost painful cessation of the fury of sound. A ripple of tense expectancy passed along their line, communicating itself from company to company in a sudden fever of preparation; a repetition of vigilant inspection of rifle and trench-mortar—but no gray-clad wave appeared in a surging rush across the dead level of the ill-fated No Man's Land.

The sergeant of E Company, slim, young, with the bronzed features of an Indian even among men whose city pallor had given way before the burning suns of the training-camps, was speaking softly, keeping up a running undertone of comment as they waited for the attack, which, for some reason, was unaccountably delayed.

He knew that they were not afraid—they had received their baptism of fire—but the nervous reaction of the charge was wearing off in a curious apathy that was due, perhaps, to the deadening effect of the tremendous barrage they had undergone. So he was speaking in a monotonous singsong, almost hypnotic in its steady iteration:

"That's the stuff, now, boys—that's the stuff—you're all right, boys, you're all right. Clancy, you were great. And you, Smith—you're aces up—handled your toasting-iron like a Packey McFarland. When they come we'll send 'em back before they start. They'll be sorry they ever met us. They've got nothing on us—"

There came a sudden swish and a short, dull explosion, followed by a choking gasp. The man at the sergeant's left appeared to crumple—to collapse abruptly into an amorphous semblance of a man, slumping at the feet of the sergeant like an empty bag. For a brief instant Horror stalked unbidden, like a specter of death, with naked face, and at his heels came Panic.

For a brief instant it seemed that the line wavered; a ripple of movement came and went within the trench with the sudden explosion of the grenade. In the period of silent waiting for the attack which had not materialized, the face of death, which had grown familiar and blurred in the swift shock of the charge, took on all at once a personal and awesome menace.

For a moment the company was no longer a company; a unit. It became merely a crowd; a collection of individuals united only in a common fear which grew with the recollection of that huddled lump, grotesquely sprawled below the parados of earth, that which had been its face a red smear beneath the smoky curtain of the sky.

But a very little more, and the delicate balance would tilt downward in a sudden break—an emptying of courage; a communicating panic that would run like a fire along their wavering line.

But in the face of the sergeant was reflected nothing but the outward seeming of an impassive mask.

"Hell!" he grunted briefly, with a swift, sweeping movement covering the dead man with his overcoat.

At that moment came the bombs.

As the sergeant straightened from his task, abruptly he beheld, rising against the black pall of the sky, something which, for a moment, seemed strangely familiar—of the shape and perhaps double the size of something he well remembered, and with the crisscross markings of a golf ball.

The bomb was rising lazily, in a sweeping parabola before the break. The first grenade had come so suddenly that he had not seen it, but the second bomb appeared to hang in its flight, before, with an abrupt swoop, it plunged downward across the parapet almost into his face.

The sergeant knew that between the pulling of the detonator and the explosion there would be an interval of perhaps four seconds. Others would be coming over presently; but he knew that with him, in that brief flash of time—or of eternity—rested the company's morale.

For a fleeting instant he experienced a feeling of remoteness. The surflike booming of the artillery changed to the long, rolling thunder of a more familiar field. He was out there, alone, waiting—

At that instant his foot slipped on a slimy trench-board; but, putting up his hand and with a desperate leap, he caught the bomb, whirled, and, with a lightning recovery, tossed it in a flashing arc into the stronghold of the enemy.

The tension snapped suddenly into a flurry of activity. How many bombs he caught, or how many he threw, he did not know. He was everywhere at once; and around and about him E Company, as one man, followed his lead in a cold fury of energy.

Then, with a final burst of effort, hurling their remaining grenades full in the forefront of the abortive counter-attack, they were over the top and into the enemy trench, stabbing and shooting in a resistless surge of victory.

In the shadows of evening a party of men were returning to a rest-billet behind the lines. As they plodded onward with weary cheerfulness, searching for a sight of the lorry which should have met them at the first observation post, a shaft of the declining sun shone for a moment full upon the face and figure of a man who bore upon his arm the chevrons of a sergeant of infantry.

As he gazed with steady eyes into the blaze of sunset, something in his attitude, in his glance, restored to memory another evening of blazing sunset and yet another field. He turned his head, and I knew him in a moment.

He was the left fielder of my baseball days.

MY WORLD

ALL skies, all ways, all climes,
Are but one region fair;
Unbarriered is the wondrous world
If only you are there.

What though old earth may have
A dome of azure skies,
'Tis but the faint reflex of all
That rounds in your dear eyes.

And happy is the way,
Though in a desert land,
If close within my clasp I feel
The pressure of your hand.

And climes? Where'er I go
'Tis floral, perfumed South,
If on my longing lips I feel
The warmth of your sweet mouth!

Lily Young Cohen.

"XTX"

by

Perley Poore Sheehan

Author of "The Star of Adventure," "Four-Forty at the Fort Penn," etc.

CHAPTER XXXVI.

WHERE TRUTH IS NOT.

THERE is always something uncanny and cogent about the lie of an honest man. Kent was honest. He was the type that hates dissimulation. He was a scientist. He was instinctively so. And ever since he was a little boy he had had the gift of precise truth. This had become more than a passion with him as he grew up and took his place in the scientific world. It had become a habit. The habit amounted to an orbit, from which he could no more deviate than could a planet escape from its allotted course.

And yet Kent had lied. He must have lied. So Professor Rudolph Lehr told himself.

" Just what do you wish me to believe, Herr Kent?" the professor queried.

" I mean you to believe," Kent replied, " that purely in the interest of science, I had just about determined to communicate to you the full truth of X T X."

" As I have just informed you," said the professor, " our own researches in this connection have been crowned with success."

" In that case," smiled Kent, " why do you grant me the honor of this interview?"

" At the same time," the professor continued, disregarding Kent's question, " I dare say that such a communication from you, if honestly made, would not be devoid of academic interest. Are you prepared to state in full all the steps of your process?"

" Precisely."

" I warn you, that this is no moment for further chicanery on your part, Kent."

" None is intended."

" In any case, it would be instantly discovered. As you are doubtless aware we are conversant with practically all of your method in arriving at X T X. Not that we care to follow that method. We have a better process of our own."

All the time that they were fencing like this, each must have known that the other had not forgotten that preliminary statement of Professor Lehr concerning the fate of that " dear one " whose doom the Kaiser had sealed. Yet it was characteristic of these two men—so similar in some respects, so dissimilar as to the nature of their souls—that neither should have considered it necessary to revert to that phase of the discussion.

" We shall go," said Professor Lehr, " to the psychological laboratory."

Kent grinned. In spite of the torture he had been through, and the torture that he was suffering still, and in spite of all the torture that all the others were passing through just then, and the eruptive, volcanic outpouring of devastation over Ellstadt, Kent had to grin. This was German thoroughness with a vengeance. He knew why Professor Lehr was conducting him to

This story began in The Argosy for March 9.

the psychological laboratory. There was a certain complicated bit of mechanism over there. Vulgarly it was called the "truth-machine." With certain of its appurtenances strapped to the patient's wrists, and a stethoscope telltale against his heart, the devil himself would be unable to make false statement without detection.

So the inventor of the machine claimed. So Professor Rudolph Lehr and most other German scientists believed. They were strong for efficiency. Man was fallible. Not so a machine.

And it was when this experimental, yet infallible, research into the veracity of Gordon Kent had been successfully carried out, that there crept over Ellstadt the cloud of a doubt so tremendous, a lie so monumental, that all the other events of the day were as nothing compared to it.

This was not the Kaiser at all who had come to Ellstadt.

Himmel!

It was to shriek!

It was a nonsense and yet an apocalypse!

No one seemed to know just how the rumor had originated. No one seemed to be willing to stand sponsor for it. Yet no one could say positively that the thing was not so. Every one in Germany, as well as almost every one outside of Germany, was familiar to some extent with that variously considered legend of a duplicate—and even a triplicate—Kaiser who showed himself to the armies on the various fronts when the all-high himself didn't care to be disturbed.

Added to this groundwork of tradition was the powerful impulse to accept the rumor as true in the present instance.

It meant salvation!

Suppose the Kaiser was held hostage, here and now in Ellstadt, by the murderous lunatic who had thus far and otherwise already brought almost complete destruction on the place! Ellstadt and every one in it would be cursed until the end of time. It was already cursed, but the present curse would be a benison compared to the curse to follow.

The afternoon was wearing on.

One side of the vast quadrangle of buildings surrounding the parade-ground had already been blown to destruction or was fiercely burning. The reducing-works, oil-soaked, always a stench to heaven, were now unrolling thunderclouds shot through with flame. Then the knitting-mills had caught the contagion of fire—spread to them, so it was said, by a half-witted child—moved, doubtless, by some spirit of divine justice.

Through the pall of smoke that was turning the very sunshine black, there began to arrive those first delegates and ambassadors from the front summoned there by the inexplicable messages which had reached them by wireless.

They came by automobile. They came by aeroplane. They came by those swift airships of the Parsefal type.

There were marshals and generals. There were members of the general staff so terribly great that even their names and faces were unfamiliar to any but those of the highest grade in the military hierarchy. The Brunos and the Conrads, the Ludolfs and the Bertholds—it was like a congress of all the old robber-barons of the Middle Ages; men with scarred and sullen faces—not all of the scars having been put there by swords; glittering and brutal and noble; the princess and the "vons."

What was this they saw?

But, worse yet, what was this they heard?

Had the whole world gone stark, roaring mad?

Well they might ask. Down there on the blood-red front they had already left such confusion as had not been seen there since the battle of the Marne. To worse confusion yet had they come.

Stout Colonel von Zeibig was the storm-center. All that he could tell them was the truth as he knew it. But the very truth was incredible, let alone the incredible speculations which piled themselves up on the truth. The truth was adamant, like a rocky coast. The speculations went leaping and hurling over this like a gigantic surf—in which nothing could live, where all ordinary gifts of navigation were in vain.

Now was the time for the triumph of pure reason as represented by Professor Rudolph Lehr.

Professor Lehr insisted on this:

That even if the Kaiser were dead or mad—or neither of these, and that the Kaiser actually was a hostage to the black power that had come up out of the west—all this was still of minor importance to the crowning triumph he was ready to announce.

He had mastered the master of X T X.

CHAPTER XXXVII.

"IT IS HE!"

THIS day, whatever else had happened, the military might of Germany was to become possessed of a new weapon. It was a weapon that all the chiefs had heard about. X T X had been speculated over, discussed, and longed for by the great general staff ever since the first spy had returned to Germany with news of it.

Perhaps the value of it has been exaggerated. But this wasn't likely.

For example, a few bombs filled with the compound, dropped into the heart of a crowded city, would almost certainly wreak such a disaster that the strongest nerves would fail. A dozen such bombs on Paris, on London—on New York or Chicago, by means of a system the staff had already worked out—and the ultimate triumph of *Mittel-Europa* would be as good as realized.

Then, there was what could be accomplished at the front. X T X would turn Verdun into a bloody mud-bank over which, this time, the legions of the crown prince would walk unhindered. A new and terrible cogency would be lent the Austrian guns on the Italian front. The rebellious cities of Poland and Russia could be lashed with a whip of scorpions.

X T X!

It was the realization of almost every dream that had been deferred since the beginning of the war.

Professor Lehr made his announcement to a special meeting of all the high officers then in Ellstadt—and the number of them was being constantly augmented by fresh arrivals. The meeting was held in the former general quarters of the late Prince von Trebbin. The announcement was a rift in the clouds of the overwhelming confusion. It was almost a burst of sunshine.

But before Kent could be summoned to give a proof of what the omnipotent professor said, there came another sensation.

"*Der Kaiser!*"

It is actually he.

He was not held hostage after all.

That there had been treason in the Ellstadt garrison there could be no doubt. But the Kaiser was safe, and the Kaiser was there, and the Kaiser was his own self.

The news was brought to the meeting by a breathless young aide-de-camp. He was one of those who had taken part in the distressing and mysterious events over in the prison-buildings.

This and that were put together. The events of the day thus far were like the fragments of a shattered bowl, but now the fragments were being put together again. There were still fragments of the bowl that were missing. There were other fragments which couldn't be made to fit in. Still out of the wreckage and mess, some sort of a rational plan appeared.

The Kaiser always did have a genius for disorganization. There wasn't a member of the general staff who wouldn't have admitted as much—secretly, at least. The events of this day had merely constituted a case in point.

What had happened?

The Kaiser had most certainly come to Ellstadt, drawn there by the supreme importance of finding out for himself the truth about X T X. He had arrived in the nick of time. There was an enemy of the dynasty in Ellstadt, sure enough; but that enemy was none other than General Prince Friedrich von Trebbin. In the nick of time also had Prince von Trebbin been killed, likewise the murdered prince's acolyte, the young Baron von Autz. So much was clear. The Kaiser himself had ordered this assembly of leaders from the front precisely because he knew that nothing which could happen there could equal in importance the final announcement concerning X T X.

The rooms where the officers had assembled were abuzz. They were also aglitter with patent-leather and decorations. That peculiarly curt, rasping snarl of the German command was the fashion of speech. Every one was exceedingly correct. Heels clicked. There were muttered *"hochs!"* This was *kultur.* These were all supermen!—*uebermenschen! Deutschland ueber Alles!*

But more than one high-born, high-placed, junker-bred worthy in the crowd at that was chewing some bitter cud of doubt and resentment. There were some things which not even the all-high himself should be permitted to do. His genius for disorganization should be finally checked. Hasten the moment when the present crown price was Kaiser! The crown prince was the ideal. No genius he!

There were even those in the glittering throng who would have greeted the news that the Kaiser was shot, or deposed, or interned, with a fearful private joy. Then would the crown prince rule. Then would the military caste be supreme indeed.

"Hoch!"

"Hoch der Kaiser!"

"Long live William of Hohenzollern by the grace of God!"

But it was a false alarm.

The baffled assembly of officers, most of them exalted, who were assembled by this time in the general quarters of the late Prince von Trebbin had swerved to the door through which the Kaiser was expected to appear. But instead of the Kaiser it was merely old Marshal von Tilly who had gone out to seek the emperor and had now returned.

The marshal had been one of Bismarck's young men in the Franco-Prussian war. He was wizen, clean-shaven, crafty, and white. He was a great German, but he had never loved the Kaiser overmuch. He quietly announced that the Kaiser was promenading with a young lady and would receive his generals, possibly, some time in the course of the evening. He wasn't sure.

"Herr Gott!"

But, in the mean time, what would be happening back there at the disordered front? Things had been left in such shape that every minute was valuable.

All of those secret doubts and resentments began to ferment afresh. They began to boil. They began to find expression in muttered imprecations and innuendos. It was the beginning of a "palace revolution." There was enough power concentrated right here to accomplish such a thing, also enough anxiety and fury.

That door by which Marshal von Tilly had just entered was again thrown open. And this time it was as if the door had let in a gust of silence. It was a silence as chilling as the breath of an arctic winter.

There was a whisper:

"It is he!"

Framed in the door stood the all-high himself.

CHAPTER XXXVIII.

PREPARE FOR PEACE.

FOR what seemed to be a long interval he stood there in absolute silence. Those who were nearest to him noticed that he was paler than usual. There may even have been those who noticed that slight bloodstain—or the edge of such a stain—that appeared on the bandage under his helmet. But they all must have felt, whatever they noticed, that he was in no mood for trifling. There was only one will which was supreme. This was the will of him who stood there in the door.

"I salute you," he said at last. And his voice was as cold as his presence. "What, may I ask, is the meaning of this assemblage here?"

The question was so astounding that it was greeted with silence. The silence took on a new significance. Those nearest the door were now able to perceive that the emperor was not alone. Just back of him, and somewhat to one side, was that young lady Marshal von Tilly had mentioned. She was beautiful. She was dressed in black silk. Her description was precisely that of the young woman who, it was now generally known, had been with Trebbin at the time of that prince's murder. "I asked you a question," came the imperial command.

Marshal von Tilly spoke up.

"As I tried to explain to your majesty, certain orders, presumably from you, were sent to headquarters from Ellstadt."

"When?"

"Shortly before noon."

"I sent no such orders."

"Nevertheless, sire, such were received."

"How? By whose hand?"

"By wireless, majesty; in the code of the current day."

"We—we—"

The imperial voice was heard to shake. It shook right into extinction like the flame of a candle.

Afterward—and not very long afterward—there were those who said that at this juncture the young woman had leaned forward and whispered something, that his majesty apparently recollected something he had forgotten.

In any case, there was a telling pause.

"I come to make an announcement," said the gray autocrat at the door. "There has been much about this day which it is not given me to explain. Your Kaiser, moreover, is now called upon to explain. There are certain things which lay solely between him and the Almighty."

There was another pause. a whispered "*Hoch!*"

"But this I can tell you. This is the announcement which I desire to make. Providence, in its inscrutable wisdom, has seen fit to deliver into our hands, at last, a weapon well suited to our might. I refer to the substance known as X T X."

There were a dozen whispered "*Hochs!*" this time.

"To accomplish this, as you are well aware, we had assembled first at Coldorf, later here at Ellstadt, some of the most justly celebrated scientists of the empire—men whose high place and glory in the history of the Fatherland are already assured; men who have already supplied us weapons with which we have injected terror into the hearts of our enemies. In spite of this terror, however, our enemies were foolish enough to persist until now we have had time to fashion this weapon to our hand."

The girl in black who stood just behind his majesty was not only listening to the imperial words. She seemed also to be alert to every movement of the room and the corridor and the world at large.

Who was she? Mystery!

And the mystery of her personality, and of her presence there, was but an added touch to the mysterious bearing of the all-high, and the whole gamut of things unexplained.

"There will be a convocation," the Kaiser continued, "of these scientists to-night at eight o'clock in the garrison-chapel at which you are invited to be present. You will be there. You will assist at the unveiling, so to speak, of this latest monument to good old German science. You will thus be prepared to carry back to your various sections of the front the glad tidings of assured victory. I ask you—ask you"—it was as if his majesty had trouble to preserve the thread of his discourse—"ask you to be patient—and prepare for peace."

That was all.

The officers had been expecting more. In certain respects they were more mystified than ever. They saw his majesty incline his head slightly, apparently to listen to something that was whispered to him by the girl in black. Then he was gone.

Old Marshal von Tilly turned slowly and regarded whitely General von Drachenheim who stood sweatily immobile just back of him.

Drachenheim's face was red and soft, but his eyes were hard and cold. Drachenheim also was the possessor of a small waxed mustache, and the needle-points of this twitched like the whiskers of a murderous bobcat. Tilly and Drachenheim more or less represented the spirit and attitude of the room.

It was then five o'clock. There were yet three hours to wait for the convocation.

What was to be done?

There was a gradual grouping together of officers according to seniority and blood. Among these various groups there was a veiled expression of things hitherto not even whispered. The empire was confronted with a crisis. Of some sort or another there would have to be action. What was that the emperor had started to say about having sent no orders? Why had he been so surprised at first to see so many of them there? And yet, why had he so wholly ignored this phase of the situation afterward?

Only Colonel von Zeibig, the nominal commander of the place, now that Trebbin was dead, was aware to some extent of the nature of the mystery, was in a position to divine to some extent the very truth of all that had happened. It was knowledge that had been coming to him in tragic driblets ever since Wayne's first arrival at the prison barracks.

But this was not news which he cared to impart. The Kaiser was in danger. That was the only thing that he cared about. Save the Kaiser—even if the whole world went tumbling down to ruin!

In all ordinary senses of the word, Colonel von Zeibig was fearless.

Yet fear, at the present time, was gripping him more and more. It was all on account of the Kaiser. In Zeibig's thought was all that had happened in cell 027. Added to this nightmare was the steadily increasing nightmare which he had initially come to report. He had read aright the mood of these assembling potentates.

What would the few troops he had already sent for avail against all this assembled might should the storm actually break?

Planning the Kaiser's downfall, were they?

There was a certain code-word extant in Germany unofficially called "the great alarm." It was a sort of super-S. O. S. There was only one occasion for which it was designed. The occasion was any crisis in which either the empire or the house of Hohenzollern was threatened with extinction. Also there was a certain commander of a Parsefal air-ship who had formerly been a subaltern under Colonel von Zeibig. The Parsefal was equipped with wireless. The colonel and the commander of the air-ship had an interview.

"What?"

"It's the truth," Colonel von Zeibig replied.

The colonel was still shaking, but it was no longer with the shake of fear. It was the shake of a tremendous rage, and this rage communicated itself to his former subaltern.

"There's a regiment of hussars at Gubenau who've acted before this as the imperial bodyguard."

"Get them here!"

"Six motor-batteries at Weselstadt."

"Call them!"

"Three divisions of flying infantry at Daunkirch."

They combed all the surrounding garrisons and depots for all that still remained there of armed force in this part of Germany. Time was limited. Also limited was the distance which could be covered by any sort of troops in the shortening, uncertain interval when they would be needed. But Zeibig and his loyal partner stretched the possibilities—sent out their super-S. O. S. further and further.

"The Kaiser was in danger. Come!"

"And what if it turns out," Colonel von Zeibig's friend demanded with a nervous laugh, "that we are foolish and wrong?"

"Then," Zeibig replied quietly, "all that we'll have to do is to shoot ourselves—like other honest Germans have done—when things went wrong."

CHAPTER XXXIX.

AS THE SUN WENT DOWN.

AT first, Wayne, from the abandoned brick-sheds in the meadows of Ellstadt, saw many things through his binoculars and felt no great alarm. As yet the meadows were safe for him and the Nighthawk. There had been diversion enough to keep the meadows bare—barracks still aflame, the reducing works still vomiting black smoke, a vast, white-hot brazier where the knitting-mills had stood.

The smoke-stified sun went lower.

Wayne was impatient of the dark. He wished now that he had waited longer before effecting his own escape from the barracks. But this was a mere passing foolishness. This was his place, here where he was. For he could see that the moment for flight could not be long delayed.

He saw the first of the enemy contingents come pouring in, then more, more yet. Some of those elements of disruption he had sown had evidently done their work. Whatever happened now, his mission would not have been wholly useless. There could be no such withdrawal of commanding officers from the front, especially at a time when so many misleading orders had just been received, without a tremendous advantage having been presented to the Allies. And Wayne was sure that those other messages which he had sent out with the Allied headquarters as their object must have reached their destination.

Back there to the west there would be events now evolving which would figure large in the news-bulletins of the following day—in Paris, in London, in New York.

Under the safe shadows of the sheds he spread the Nighthawk's wings. The Nighthawk had rested. She had not been discovered. By signs which only he himself would have read he knew that she was in perfect condition, ready for all that might still be demanded of her. She was well armed with a Lewis gun. She carried a hatch of hand-grenades—a hatch of unlaid eggs out of which all sorts of monstrosities might grow.

There was a subdued ticking.

That was the time-bomb which he himself had set to going in case the Nighthawk was captured by the enemy. A movement of his finger—or the lapse of a little time—and the silent flier would be splintered to her initial mystery.

"*Gott mit uns!*"

The expression sprang impulsively to Wayne's own lips.

He had come back to a point where he could look over toward the barracks. His first glance had been at that imperial flag which had continued to wave throughout this disastrous day. Was there something in that sacrilegious boast of its motto after all? "*Gott mit uns!*"

Ten—twenty—thirty aeroplanes! They came creeping out of the red west. They were headed straight for Ellstadt. Their contours showed that they were German—that they were fighting-machines—that they were not the kind officers of the general staff would use on any occasion.

Yet more of them! Twelve—fifteen—twenty-four!

These came out of the haze of distance further to the south. They also were headed for Ellstadt.

Wayne let out another ejaculation.

He had swung his binoculars around the sky-rim. Almost due east he picked up the shimmering flakes of a pair of Zeppelins. It was such a mobilization of air-power as not even he had seen before. And the Zeppelins also were coming this way.

He turned and ran back to where the Nighthawk stood. Regardless of anything but immediate escape, he pushed the machine out into the open. He knew that he was all but cornered. Every ticking second was against him. There was only one landing-place for an aerial fleet like that, and that was here in the meadows, as Zeibig himself had said. In two minutes—three at the most—the converging squadrons would be circling overhead, looking for a place to drop. What chance would he have then? At its best, the Nighthawk, with its muffled engine and consequent loss of speed and power, was no match for a machine of the Fokker type. Even as it was, there was a slim enough chance that he could get away by taking to his heels.

He climbed aboard.

The Nighthawk droned, quivered, sprang across the grass, slipped up into an invisible road toward the smoke-cloud which overhung the reducing works. That at least was a hiding-place.

Not in her palmiest days had Ellstadt roared with such military might.

In the old times she had merely been one of many garrison towns. It was infantry then, all infantry, an occasional intrigue, an occasional suicide. This was different!

A regiment of hussars that comes pounding in from Gubenau on their swift Polish horses—such a sight as Ellstadt has never seen! They ran a race and got here first, but they barely beat the motor-batteries from Weselstadt! The river meadows, by this time, were lined for a mile by landed aeroplanes. Signals from the Zeppelins had called out the gasping garrison to help in bringing those Zeppelins also to earth.

The sun went down darkly, then sent its red reflection up like an observation-balloon in the purpling shadows.

Something had happened to the railroad, but on the far side of the bridge a long troop-train halted and disgorged its thousand or two—or three—of hustling human ants. The ants also swung on toward Ellstadt—on foot, this time, but at the double-quick.

A plan to kidnap the Kaiser!

An attempt to assassinate him—by a foreigner—by officers—by that wild airman who this day turned Ellstadt upside down!

There are times in the history of every community when anything might be true, when all the foundations of ordinary judgments are swept away, and the sanest inhabitants are back again at the very groping dawn of intelligence and credulity.

It was like that in Ellstadt.

What had happened? What was going to happen? The troops poured in—on wing and foot, by motor and horse. Came machine-gun detachments. Came lancers and mounted rifles. Came certain communication troops all the way up from the front to mend the damaged bridge.

As if the sun had seen enough, the red reflection of its observation-balloon was hauled down behind the dark horizon. Almost instantly there flashed in long straight lines—leaning, quivering, but calm and strong—the league-long antennæ of the search-lights.

One of these questing antennæ found the imperial flag which, owing to other business, had not been lowered. At the same instant, a vagrant breeze shook out the black and yellow folds.

Those who cared might have read upon it: "*Gott mit uns!*"

CHAPTER XL.

THE BLACK SHADOW.

HE had walked and talked like a man trailed by death. No less than the humblest of Ellstadt this night was he overwhelmed by inexplicable circumstances. Yet, every now and then, as now, there emerged from his mental and spiritual fog the habit of kingship.

"My parole runs until eight o'clock."

"I may ask your majesty to extend it."

"And if I refuse?"

"Then—"

Grace Sherwood completed her sentences with a look that was sober and direct. As a matter of fact she was asking herself if she would be able to bring herself to kill this man. It is acquaintanceship that renders killing difficult and horrible. And she had become acquainted with him, this creature of power whom fate had thrust under her control. She had heard his voice lifted in weakness. She had seen him suffer. She had meditated over the mystery which he himself personified.

He had denied that he was the Kaiser. He had declared that he was the Kaiser's self.

But couldn't William of Hohenzollern always make such conflicting statements with perfect truth. William was a man as other men. William was a ruler by the grace of God. If she could only kill the imperial puppet without slaying the man!

After that queer and unsatisfactory appearance of his before the assembled officers in the headquarters of the barracks she had brought him, by the same path which she had followed that morning, back to the apartments of the late Prince von Trebbin. In all that time there was not a moment when, by the simple pressure of a finger, she could not have sent a bullet through the vitals of the person in gray.

Grace herself was as one who stands on the giddy edge of a precipice. She dared not scrutinize her position. She was an American girl. Yet she held captive the all-high of the Huns—or the semblance of him. She was conscious of this bald truth. That was what constituted her mental and spiritual precipice. And it was this that she dared not consider. She might reel. She might lose her balance. She might drag others to destruction. But also like one for whom an abyss yawns, she could neither look very far ahead nor very far back. Each instant was fraught with enough importance to demand all that she possessed of strength and will-power.

"You would not kill me?"

The all-high asked the question with an almost detached interest.

"Yes."

"And so destroy yourself?"

"Of myself—as myself—I have no right to think."

"Spoken like a good German!"

"This is war, and war is hideous—like your Prussian ideals."

"But killing me will not change—our Prussian ideals."

"That is one reason—only one reason—that your eldest son is not being proclaimed—as the next Kaiser—and the last!"

The gray shadow buried his face in his hands. He had seated himself in that chair where Prince General von Trebbin had sat and smoked and quaffed his Malaga only a few hours ago. Trebbin was dead. Was this to be the imminent fate of this other and greater representative of German might—and shame?

"Your majesty," said Grace, not ungently, "does well to meditate. I myself dare not. I have seen too many boys and women, old men and children die because of you and what you represent."

The only answer was a sigh.

"Meantime," breathed Grace.

Watching him closely, she had managed to discover a bottle of Trebbin's wine and a tin of biscuits. She herself felt no hunger. The high excitements of the day had held her natural reflexes in abeyance. But it was the trained nurse in her complex personality which warned her to take heed of her strength, and also the strength of this precious yet terrible hostage of hers.

Colonel von Zeibig she had allowed to go. Her hold on Zeibig was certain so long as she held the spirit of Zeibig's master on leash. She survived the psychology of the situation as most women in calmer moments might have surveyed the physical facts of a situation.

Zeibig, after a fashion, was become as much a servant of the Allies as she herself was. This was the truth. More and more it was on the stout, purblind German colonel that she was constrained to place her dependence—place her hope of success, hope of life.

The light was failing. Even this endless day, where great events had not followed each other but had come about simultaneously, was drawing to its close. Zeibig had gone away with the promise of returning with Gordon Kent. He had promised also to make arrangements whereby they all might escape. But Zeibig had not returned. Had his heart failed him at last? Had he gone over to the ranks of the suspicious and the doubtful? Was some final rush preparing down there below?

The closing night was like a black shadow—the black shadow of death; and the death was not that of an individual, or a regiment, or a dynasty. It was like the black shadow of the death of the world.

Speech and reflections, movements and expectations, came and went in a swift, weird shadow-dance.

Dusk in the outer world.

From somewhere came the ripping, flat sputter of machine-guns. What did they signify?

For some time now Grace had become increasingly aware of that swift and mighty concentration of military power of which Ellstadt was become the vortex. And what did that portend?

On Trebbin's table were a couple of wax tapers in a silver candlestick. They had probably been used to seal official documents. They were not intended for illumination. But Grace lit them. She moved them close to where the captive sat. She herself withdrew into the deeper shadows. The candles flickered. They cast their tremulous light down on the bowed shoulders and sunken head.

Through the girl's heart there came a pang which was almost pity. But close upon the heels of it came something like a migration of still more moving haunts.

She herself had been through the sinking of the Lusitania. She had heard the strangled cries of the drowning babies and mothers. She had seen the great ocean heave as if in pity and tenderness and rage. All these victims were passing before her eyes in ghostly processional. They were joined by the million other martyrs—of Belgium and Northern France, of the English schools and coast resorts, of Serbia, Roumania, Armenia. There followed the spectral regiments of boys and fathers gone down before poisonous gas and liquid fire, on Red Cross ships and in American factories.

She herself sighed. The sigh became articulate. The words were in prayer:

"Lord, give me strength!"

"Strength for what?"

He who sat in the candle-light lifted his haggard mask.

"Strength not to kill you," she shuddered.

CHAPTER XLI.

ATTILA'S HEIR.

FOR almost a full minute the other stared. He did not stare at the girl. He stared off into the darkness in little to one side of her. One would have sworn that he was seeing with his eyes of the flesh that ghastly, spectral procession that she had already seen with the eyes of her spirit.

"Strength not to kill me!" he intoned.

Suddenly he whirled and looked at her. His eyes looked like black points on sickly globes of white.

"Was that you who spoke just now?" he demanded.

"Yes," she answered.

He continued to stare at her.

"Who did you think it was?" she asked curiously.

"I thought it was the other one."

"What other one?"

"You used the very words she uses."

"Who?"

But the head ghost of the Hohenzollerns was again staring off into the darkness a little to one side of where Grace Sherwood sat. Was this a trick? Was this an effort at glamour? Apparently, these questions were equally in the mind of Grace Sherwood herself and of the Kaiser's shade.

As for the girl, she watched and watched, and kept her attention on the weapon she held in her hand. As for the man, he was now looking at the darkness with that same expression of surprise and incredulity that had been there before—as if to say that if this girl were not deceiving him then the darkness was.

"Speak up!" the Kaiser commanded.

Silence!

"It's a habit of yours to come around when I sit in the candle-light," he pursued, still addressing the empty gloom.

"It's your conscience," said Grace.

She had tried to speak with a normal voice, but there was something in this spectacle of a ghost communing with ghosts that somehow drew an invisible, icy thread about her throat and let out only a thin imitation of ordinary voice. Perhaps it wasn't surprising, therefore, that he who called himself the Kaiser was again deceived.

He had shot another swift glance toward Grace—a mere glance, so it seemed, to assure himself that it wasn't she who had spoken but this other presence which only he himself could see.

"My conscience!" he echoed argumentatively. "What have I got to do with conscience? God sent Etzel. God sent me!"

Etzel was the old German name for Attila—Attila, the Hun; he who once went ravaging across the frontiers of an older and better civilization, and who died in the night, perhaps at the hands of a damsel. Grace knew the story. Was the parallel to be carried even further than this heir of Attila had suggested?

"In some," whispered Grace, "conscience awakes only after they die—and die again."

There was that same straining, alert interest about the creature in gray. His eyes bulged. They were still focused on the vague darkness. They were not so much indicative of fright as they were of a sort of awed eagerness.

"Then you are not conscience!" he said.

Grace held her peace. There was another period of comparative silence. Through the windows, from the direction of the parade-ground, there came a lulling, insistent, complex roar beyond human comprehension, like that of surf. And this roar was likewise beyond human comprehension. It was the roar given off by men and machines—that much was clear; but these men and machines were here at the behest of a shadow, of a terrible thing which not even she, who was so close to it, could identify as anything more or less than the meanest creature in the trenches.

Cautiously, this man she watched removed his gaze from the darkness long enough to watch what he was doing as he awkwardly poured himself a glass of wine and fumbled from the box a biscuit or two. He spilled a little of the wine as he drank it. He munched the dry biscuits and let the crumbs fall.

His mustache was disordered. The sagging flesh of his jowls rippled and made foolish little contractions and expansions. Not since the morning had a razor touched his imperial dermis. He needed a shave.

His provender was only half-masticated and there was still a drop of wine on his mustache when he was again swiftly absorbed by that presence, whatever it was, just over there beyond the late Friedrich von Trebbin's table. His mouth was open. The candle-light exaggerated all the lines and planes that had been sculptured into his physiognomy by no one will ever know what secret lusts and griefs.

" I and my old Fritz," he said in a throaty mumble.

This time he was leering, in a mere facial cartoon of kingship. At first, Grace thought that the Fritz of whom he spoke was the prince whose chair he occupied. But she was wrong, as she was soon to discover.

" He's the ghost-maker! Old Fritz! What were the Lusitania's drownings compared with those of the Deluge? What were the plagues of Belgium and Serbia compared with the plagues of Egypt? Talk to me of conscience! You might as well talk of conscience to old Fritz!"

His majesty—call him that—was letting himself go into a greater austerity. It was evident by this time that he was addressing some familiar spirit of his, and that he was following a line of argument such as he must have followed before. It was a line of argument that strengthened him, renewed his assurance, increased his sense of authority.

" What right have you to speak to me?" he demanded, now thoroughly stern. " To question me—why, that is to question the Almighty!"

" Stop!" hissed Grace. She could stand the demoniacal comedy no longer. " Stop! Or I may forget myself!"

Her cry was not without its effect. The royal jester shook himself out of his species of delirium as a man might awaken from a day-dream. A spasmodic shiver shook him.

" What's the matter?" he demanded.

" You were saying horrible things."

" What, for example?"

" You spoke—about the drowning of the Lusitania victims—and the Belgian horrors—as if they were justified—in the eyes of God!"

The mere thought that any one could say such a thing, even in a moment of aberration, filled her with such sickening horror that she shuddered again, that she had to make a conscious effort to control herself. She couldn't be merely the woman. She had to be the soldier.

The Kaiser's semblance stared at her with haughty disdain.

" And what's wrong about that?"

She didn't answer. She merely sat there wondering if, after all, she was the chosen instrument to rid the earth of this monstrosity. She was willing, but there was a prayer in her heart.

The comedy—or the tragedy—was not ended, though almost.

After that sneer of his, the imperial one had oddly turned as if again expectant of seeing again that thing, whatever it was, that he had already seen.

This time, did Grace see it?

For an instant she thought she did.

Yes, there it was—a stir of darkness amid the darkness, a deeper shadow, a shadow that was surmounted by a face. Out of the face came a salutation:

" Your majesty!"

But his majesty let out a squeak.

It was not until the ugly reverberation of this was gone that Grace recognized the apparition.

Colonel von Zeibig had returned.

That was all.

" Your majesty!" the colonel repeated, amazed and apologetic.

" *Hund!* gasped his majesty. " You frightened me."

(To be concluded NEXT WEEK.)

The Log=Book

By the Editor

TO be able to foresee and to prognosticate the future—not in a mystic, but simply in a shrewdly prophetic sense—is probably the greatest gift the gods of fortune can give to any man. Intelligently used, such a gift is the key of the door to greatness. I doubt, however, if any truly great prophet ever indulged in the luxury of a single “ I told you so ”—which is at once one of the commonest and most irritating expressions in the English language. Most of us lesser folk have used it many times—and nearly always in a tone of gloating triumph that has had the effect of making our “ victims ” feel rather murderous, particularly if our sagacity was principally due to dumb luck—which it usually is. All of which leads me to wonder how many “ I told you sos ” the solution to

“ HIDDEN EYES ”

BY ERIC LEVISON

will provoke. Not many, I imagine—if any. Because this splendidly written serial is really *more than mysterious* in every one of its five sledgehammer parts, the first of which will appear—NEXT WEEK.

Will any one—no matter how innocent or gentle—kill, if the provocation be strong enough? The accepted idea of a murderer is that of a low-browed criminal, or of one whose previous acts have led him to the deed. But this is the problem presented in

“ THE MYSTERY AT NINETY-ONE ”

BY FRED JACKSON

the title of a complete novel of absorbing interest which shows the author at his best, the suspense beginning with the opening paragraph. From the moment when *Maurice Burke* receives his veiled visitor until the final, startling disclosure, events move in a swift succession of baffling incidents, the final solution being as absolutely unexpected as it is positively unique.

Things that are most spectacular are not necessarily most effective, and it frequently happens that the quiet, easy-going, unobtrusive individual is the man who is capable of doing the most real damage to adversity in a crisis. “ THE SLOW EXPLOSIVE MAN,” by Eugene P. Lyle, Jr., is an excellent example of the sort of quietness that is volcanic; and there isn't a bit of doubt about the story being intensely interesting. You'll discover just how interesting it is the minute you begin to read it. It “ takes hold ” instantly.

Of a somewhat different sort is “ WEST IS EAST,” by Lee Landon. This is the kind of story that not only encourages much joy, but at the same time stimulates considerable thought. All sorts of people will read this clever little tale and enjoy every bit of it, because it is a story that is built to strike a responsive cord in the heart of every one who hasn't forgotten how to dream dreams.

Several readers have inquired when we are going to give them another story by Howard Dwight Smiley, one of THE ARGOSY favorites some years ago. Well, Mr. Smiley comes back next week in great shape with "FULL MOON IN APRIL," which is not at all the sentimental love tale the title may make it sound, but the thrilling narrative of what happened to two prospectors in the endeavor to keep faith to the promise they had made an old comrade.

THE REASON FOR READING

In the present Log you will find a host of correspondents rallying to the defense of their beloved Western tales. Making things lively, here and there will appear a protest from the minority represented by E. F. A., whose letter appeared in the Log-Book for February 2.

Fremont, Nebraska.

As a reader of THE ARGOSY and a great admirer of stories from the pen of Charles Alden Seltzer and Zane Grey, I do not feel like passing over the criticism of E. F. A., of Lyons, Iowa, in yesterday's ARGOSY without a word of protest. My reason for reading light literature is the resting effect it gives after a hard day's mental strain in an office. To be really enjoyed, the stories must be very interesting or exciting, and I know of no better light fiction than what is based on Western life in the early days, even though the plots in many of the stories are very similar. To me "Riddle Gawne" was just splendid, and I hope you will keep them coming thick and fast from Mr. Seltzer and also from Zane Grey. By the way, you have several good authors, and I wish to congratulate Carolyn Wells on "Vicky Van."

C. C. PARKER.

THE LIFE OF A MAGAZINE

No fear of our stopping Western stories. I shall bear in mind the suggestion as to the Northwest Mounted Police, certainly a fine body of men.

Gordon, Kansas.

For the love of Mike, don't stop your Western stories. They are the life of a magazine (for true-blue Americans). Would also like to have some good serials in THE ARGOSY of the Northwest Mounted Police. I am sure they would help improve THE ARGOSY, which is already the best magazine on the market, regardless of cost. I note that one of your Canadian readers is knocking Western stories and wants war stories. He also says there is no West. He probably lives in the jungles and knows no better. A good Western story of adventure, or Northwest Mounted Police story, is the one that takes the prize.

An ARGOSY lover,
R. L. OBERDICK.

THE ARGOSY PUTS OFF SUPPER-TIME

As I have already stated in the Log, William S. Hart has acquired the motion-picture rights to "Riddle Gawne," so that our readers will have a chance to see this breezy Western tale on the screen probably before summer-time. Note that Mrs. A. P. is a lover of Hopkins's Western stories. Not a few readers have written glowingly of "The Sword Lover."

Seattle, Washington.

I have not seen any words of praise of "The Sword Lover." My, but it had me spellbound! When my husband came home with THE ARGOSY I had to read it before I could serve supper. Give us some more like it. I also liked "Riddle Gawne." Bill Hart would play that part fine. "Tessie of Rainbow Glen" and "A Ranch Secret" were good. I believe those two were by Hopkins. "Vicky Van," "The Other Trent," and "The Fifth Ace" were all splendid. We have read THE ARGOSY for the last five years. I have five kiddies, but I always have time to read it.

Best of success to THE ARGOSY is the wish of

MRS. A. P.

FROM MEMORY'S STOREHOUSE

Here's a letter from one thoroughly imbued with the Western spirit. There's color and feeling in it, and surely it would be almost a crime to deprive one so fond of Western tales of the chance to read them, even if the ground has been gone over so many times.

Gladstone, Michigan.

Just a line to take a punch at some of those who object to those Western stories. Now, I do not object to any story from any corner of the universe that thrills and holds one's interest from first to last. Nor do I hold to any one particular author, as I have read some very interesting stories written by nearly every author who has contributed to the pleasure of THE ARGOSY'S readers for many years, now about eighteen or twenty, I think. Fred Jackson, El Comancho, Chalmers, and many others of the years agone have written clean, heartgripping stories that held one's interest from start to finish. Of the more recent ones "Riddle Gawne" is one of the best; "The Man with the 44 Chest" and the *John Solomon* stories were fine also. But a few years ago I read a story by Zane Grey, "The Riders of the Purple Sage," that held me, because—well, because if Zane Grey never saw the ground where his plot was laid, he has the most realistic imagination I ever knew. So what was my surprise and delight to find in "The Desert Crucible," by Zane Grey, published in THE ARGOSY a short time ago, the sequel to that first story, "The Riders of the Purple Sage." I have since got it in book form under its new title, "The Rainbow Trail."

I can close my eyes and see the Western sun glinting on the rolling stretches of alkali-crusted sand-reaches, with here and there the patches of purple sage and scent its odor as the horses brushed through it. I can see the rigid reaches of foot-hills, and away to the southwest the low-lying peaks of San Mogollano, desolate wastes of piled-up sand and rocks. And when the cañon country is reached I can yet see the high-ridged cliffs, almost sublime in their silent grandeur, standing sentinel-like over the grim, silent depths at their feet.

I almost believe I could point to Mr. Grey the cañon he named Surprise, and the red-walled sides of the one branching to the left and west where, looking up, you can see the old walls of Zuni ruins, where years ago a people lived and thrived; and down at the crag's base I still see the waving stems of the sage lilies, and back, a little higher up among the spruce thickets, I can hear the snarl of the spruce cats as they retreat from the sight and smell of man. I have seen a cabin, old, rotten, and roofless, and near by a low mound, rock-covered, to keep the still form within safe from digging animals, and at its head a rotted, rough-carved board, fallen flat, its message almost obliterated but a date and "Lily died here —82."

And I have sometimes wondered if Zane Grey had not written his stories from thoughts and scenes brought up from some of memory's storehouse of facts. Stories like those are better than good, so my wish is that THE ARGOSY continue to publish all such stories, even if they be from the wild and woolly West so much objected to by E. F. A. WALLACE A. CAMERON.

COME ON WITH THE LETTERS

Yes, I personally read and answer all the letters printed in the Log, and enjoy the job at that. I've just told the printer to give me a little more top room, so that fewer letters need be crowded out.

Blanchard, Michigan.

I am very sure you are a very busy man, if you personally read and answer all the letters printed in the Log-Book Department, together with all the other work incident to an editor's job. I have read THE ARGOSY for some time, and have had the satisfaction of seeing THE ARGOSY grow better. I am a backer of Cameron every time, and uphold the desires expressed by Cameron in THE ARGOSY of February 2. Stories of adventure have lost the old thrilling situations and charm. I have read hundreds of books of all kinds, but I am sure that I do not find stories of adventure as strong as they used to be. As Cameron says, give us detective stories, stories of the plains of pioneer days, and you have stories that are worth your time to read.

I believe there are a good many others who think as Cameron and myself. I would be pleased to hear, through the Log-Book, from others on this subject. Let's all get together at once and give the editor a chance to enlarge the Log-Book and hire an extra hand or two to take care of the extra mail coming his way. If the editor will only bother with letters of this sort, I am sure it would be very interesting for all of us.

I am sure I enjoy the Log-Book thoroughly. As to the editor's note of inquiry above Cameron's as to what readers think about printing nihilist stories just now, I am with the editor. Although I like nihilist stories, I think just at present we can get along without them. But, whatever we all do, let's all boost THE ARGOSY and bother the editor with questions and suggestions. He must be used to his big family of ARGOSY fans by this time. Hoping you may find place for this in the Log, I remain, a friend for all the Munsey publications,

C. A. STAFFORD.

THE WEST STILL VERY MUCH ALIVE

No plot to Western stories? Perish the thought, says our friend below; and, judging by my mail, there are a host of readers to agree with him. No fear of his not continuing to like THE ARGOSY. He'd know why if he could peep into our safe, where we keep the stories.

Haverhill, Massachusetts.

Read Frank Smith's article in THE ARGOSY of February 9 and I totally disagree with him, not to what he says about "The Green Opal Ring" or "The Sword Lover," because I liked those myself, but to his allusions to there being no plot to Western stories, and also that there is no West now. I have been in every State in the Union and quite a few in Canada, and therefore I know that the West is just as alive (in certain parts) as it was fifty years ago, and the more Western stories you print, the better I'll like it.

R. Z. POLUN.

NO KICK AGAINST WAR STORIES

Our Chicago friend certainly delves into the past, as I note from the names of the stories he mentions, some of which were printed nearly thirty years ago. He's a stanch adherent of the Western brand of fiction, and I'm sure does not feel as lonesome as do those who have ranged themselves in the opposition.

7323 Vincennes Avenue,
Chicago, Illinois.

I have read THE ARGOSY since I was in knee-breeches, and have not one kick to make yet. Such stories as "The Rajah's Fortress," "Checkmate," "Under Africa," "Treasure of South Lake Farm," "The Mystic Mine," and "Richard Dare's Venture" were certainly hummers. THE ARGOSY of to-day suits me, and is getting finer right along. So I see no reason for any kicks.

"Riddle Gawne," "Ranger Number Seven," "The Spirit of the Feud," "Hemmed In," "The Green Opal Ring," "Hell Hath No Fury," "A Woman's Prey," "A Good Indian," "The Master of the Hour" were undeniably great stories. Frank Smith and C. B. Ward couldn't have read any of Zane Grey's work or they wouldn't kick against Western stories. I for one, will stick for the old wild and woolly against anything else. The soldiers and Jackies can tell you which they'd rather read, "puncher tales" or war stories; no kick against war stories, though.

"The Cockpit" was a dandy. Just keep E. J. Rath, Achmed Abdullah, Zane Grey, Seltzer, Max Brand, Fred Jackson, Victor Rousseau, and Edwin L. Sabin working, and I won't have any kicks. I don't know whether you'll print this or not, but I think I am voicing the sentiments of at least half of your readers when I say that F. Smith and C. B. Ward are all to the bad about Western stories. Well, I've got this load off my chest, so I'll not take up any more of your time. An old friend of The Argosy,

Milton White Cloud Bretz.

WOULD LIKE WESTERN STORIES OFTENER

Mr. Graves will be glad to see a tale from his favorite, Smiley, in the next number of The Argosy. I have just purchased a novelette from him, which will see the light in the course of a few weeks. No fear but that the Western tales will come often.

Elkland, Missouri.

I have always been a reader of the Log-Book, but never could muster up enough courage to write before; but the last two numbers have contained kicks against Western stories, and it has got me "het" up to the writing point. I have taken The Argosy for a number of years, and have found very few stories but what were interesting; but I like Western stories best of all, and I would certainly hate to see them cut out; would rather see them come a little more often.

What has become of Smiley? He wrote the best short story I think I ever read, entitled "A Tough Tenderfoot." "Riddle Gawne" was certainly fine. Tell Seltzer to get busy. I was glad to see the change from a monthly to a weekly, and here's wishing The Argosy a long and prosperous life.

Lewis E. Graves.

HOW ABOUT THIS, READERS?

Dave Dashaway suggests a new theory of why certain readers don't care for certain stories. I scarcely think it tenable, however. As a rule I find that persons enjoy reading tales, the scenes of which are laid in localities with which they are familiar. I know I do, for one. For example, I was not very keen for Italian stories until after I had been to Italy myself.

Baltimore, Maryland.

Mr. Frank Smith is probably a Western man, and that is the reason he doesn't like your Western stories. If he were from the East, he would not like stories about the East all the time. The Argosy has some of each, and so nobody with good sense would say that. "Vicky Van," "The Fifth Ace," and "The Other Trent" are very good stories. Hoping Mr. Frank Smith will read this, I remain,

Very truly yours,
Dave Dashaway.

A TOUCH OF FRIENDSHIP

It's very nice to read what Miss Falls has to say about the "touch of friendship" inspired by the strangers' letters in the Log-Book. This feeling is very much deepened, naturally, now that they come every week.

Mount Gay, West Virginia.

I have wanted to write a short note to the Log ever since I have been reading The Argosy. I always read the Log-Book through the first thing after I get the magazine. I am not a subscriber, but I get it and the *All-Story Weekly* at a news-stand. I have nothing but praise for both. The short stories are interesting, and I read every one of them; but I really enjoy the serials best. I think Mr. Billings is missing some good things when he fails to read the short stories, especially the novelettes.

This is a lonesome place, and I can hardly wait for The Argosy and the *All-Story Weekly* to arrive, and the letters in the Log-Book bring a touch of friendship as no other "stranger's" letters do. I like the scenes laid in the West better than any of the other stories.

(Miss) Mary Falls.

WON'T DESERT THE SHIP

Thank you, Mr. Farmer, for the high compliment conveyed in your letter. It is an editor's business, though, to try to know what the majority of his readers like best, and to give it to them. Edgar Rice Burroughs is an *All-Story Weekly* writer.

Vestaburg, Michigan.

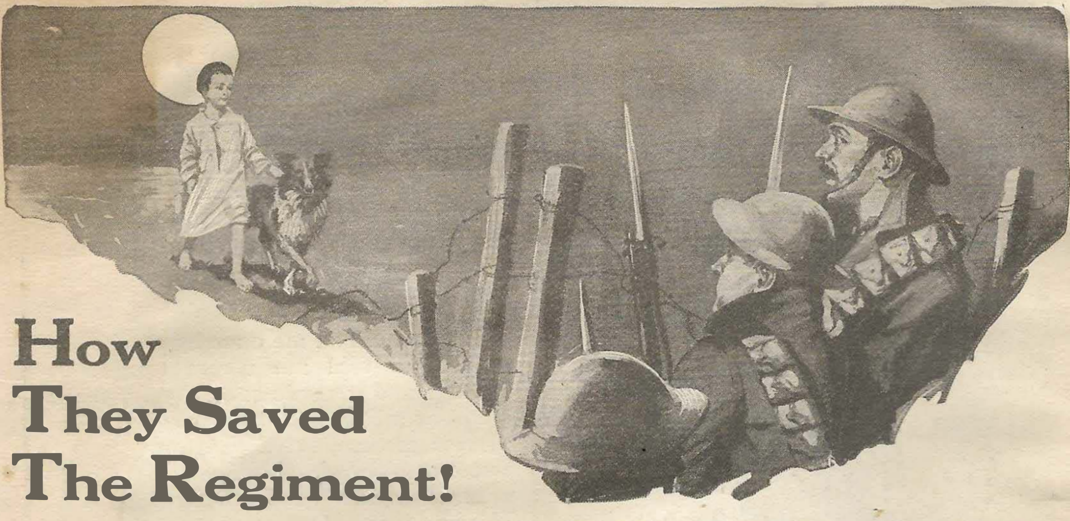
I want to express my opinion of The Argosy, which I have read for several years. I'd rather had a semimonthly by far, but a weekly is to be preferred to a monthly. I had just about decided to stop taking your magazine, because I didn't find time to read it all. Then the current issue came along, and, believe me, that idea quickly fled. The attraction is too much, and I shall try harder to find time to read it, that's all.

Do you know, I had a letter already written, asking why you never have a Civil War story, why the impossible stories had disappeared, and why there wasn't a real oldfashioned Indian tale. Behold, it came to pass when I looked in that current issue; there was the impossible story, "The Fruit of the Lamp," and it starts dandy. Then the Log-Book forecast promised an Indian tale by a man who can write them, Sabin. Then I remembered that you had promised a Civil War story some time in the near future, so I promptly tore up that other letter and wrote this. I'll never ask for a story again, for the editor knows his business, and I won't think of leaving the old ship any more.

I like your war stories and those with war settings, and stories of our own soldiers should be interesting. I was in the army up until a month ago, and we all like that kind of story. You would be surprised to see how much The Argosy and the *All-Story Weekly* are read in camp. I was in the hospital a few weeks before being discharged, and they all liked The Argosy. It will be a godsend for those that are lucky enough to get them in the trenches.

I hear the old readers speak of *The Golden Argosy.* I would be glad to buy some of them, but don't suppose there are any in existence. If any reader has any, please write me. I would like to read some of those early Argosys I hear so much about. Before I close, I wish to say I've never read a poor story in The Argosy. I hope you will pardon the length of this letter. I have written to the Log-Book before, but only a few lines. In conclusion, would like to ask if Edgar Rice Burroughs writes for The Argosy, and if not, why not?

Yours forever,
Harold Clair Farmer.



How They Saved The Regiment!

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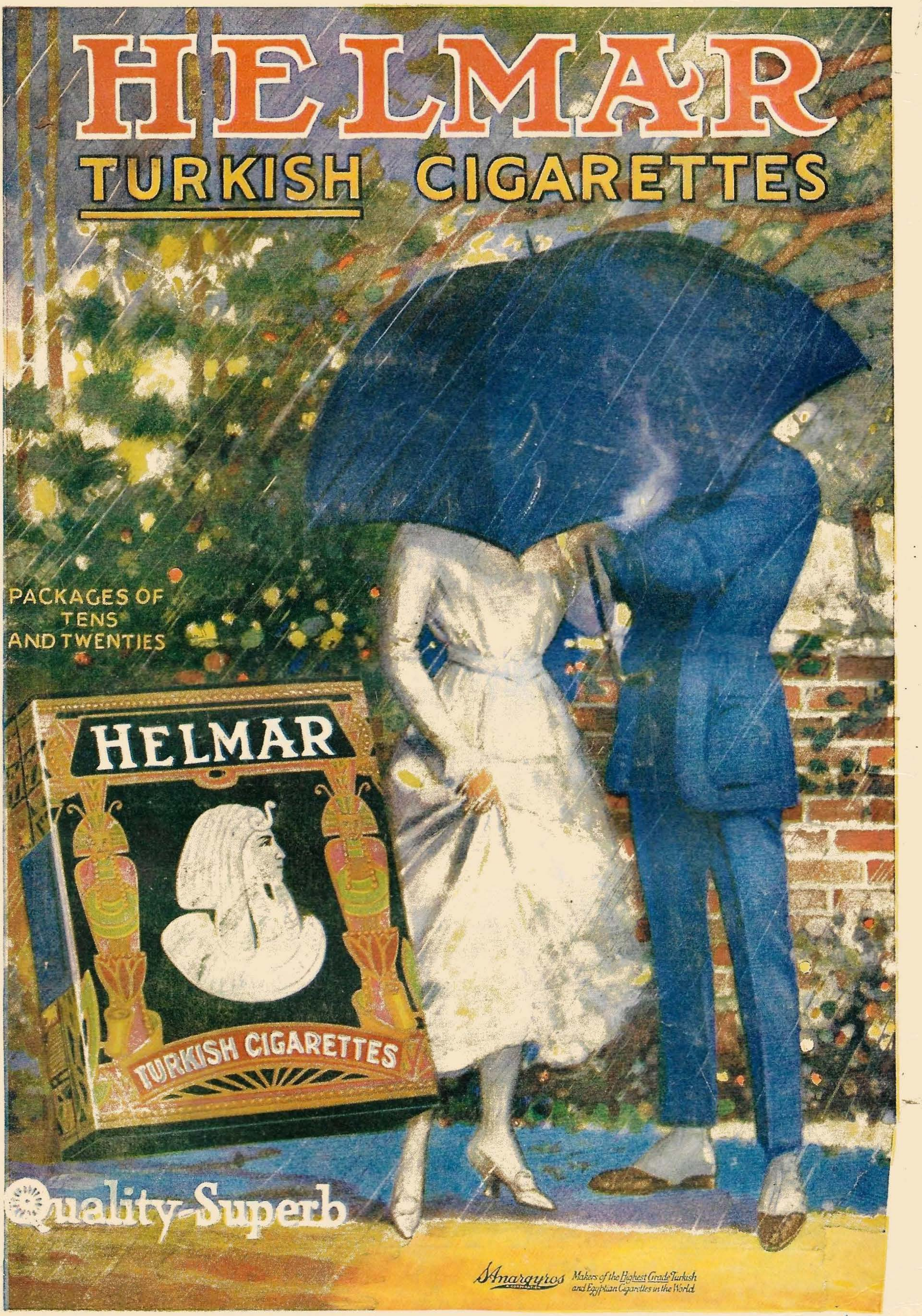
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